













# A Modern Pharisee

1859

  
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"That is all right," he muttered, and returned again to his little sitting-room and to his daughter Sophy.

"You think he'll recover now?" she questioned, somewhat indifferently.

"Oh yes. He'll be nearly all right again by to-morrow."

"It's scarcely like you, Dad, to take so much trouble for nothing."

"I don't pretend to be taking trouble for nothing. There may be a good deal in it."

"How?"

"I'm not in a position to explain yet. But I think I have made a discovery, and an important one."

"What sort of discovery?"

"There you go again, with your usual inquisitiveness. Did I not say I'm not in a position to explain yet?"

"But you've roused my curiosity."

"That is nothing new. You are always curious about something."

"But suppose you are right in your surmise, will it be of any advantage to us?"

"Child of the old block," he answered, with a satirical smile. "Am I given to doing something for nothing?"

"I'm beginning to think so," she answered, with a pout; "or else that you do very little."

"Unfilial as usual. I cannot c  
my aid. But I am hoping the tid

"You've been hoping that, I remember."

"All things come to those who

"Except the things they wait for. we are likely to benefit by the case up

"If persistence could be accounted  
would stand high among the saints."

" I don't want to be a saint, but I do want to see less pinching days."

" Are you not seeing them ? Are you not enjoying yourself here by the sea ? Are you not out on holiday, decked out in your Sunday best ? "

" Don't talk about Sunday best, please ! You should see the people who are staying at the Poppleham and the Grand."

" I have seen them."

" And don't you envy them ? "

" Perhaps. But who knows ? All is not gold that glitters, they say."

" But you would like the gold, wouldn't you ? "

" I would, my child ; I would. I keep hoping for better days, and to-day my hope is very bright."

" And won't you tell me what makes it bright ? You needn't be so tantalising."

" There is so much to be unravelled yet. I'm only at the beginning."

" But you might let me into the secret as far as you have got."

" I will in good time. It's a long story, going back over twenty years."

" And there's money in it ? "

He laughed.

" How keen you are, Sophy. But so much I will tell you. There is a large fortune involved—a very large fortune as I look at it."

" And where do we come in ? "

" Ah, that is to be discovered yet ! What if my Sophy were to marry a man rich beyond the dreams of avarice ? "

And he waved his hand and smiled.

" No rich man will ever look at me," she answered,

with a pout. "What chance is there? Rich men don't come our way. We're out of their circle."

"He might not know he was rich," he said mysteriously.

"What! Is that your discovery?"

"And what if it is?"

"I don't think much of it. Fishing for stars out of an attic window is not usually a lucrative business."

"You've no faith in your own ability."

"No one can accomplish the impossible."

"I'm not talking about impossibilities. Men are more easily caught than you think."

"Fools!"

"All men are fools where women are concerned. Besides, you would tolerate the fool for the sake of the money."

"I'd tolerate anything for a motor-car and lovely dresses, and any amount of cash."

"Some day you may have your chance."

"Don't be mysterious. Who is the young man upstairs? What do you know about him?"

For a moment or two Dr. Wilks hesitated. Then he said—

"I will trust you, Sophy. Our fortunes are bound up together. This young man—if I'm not more mistaken than I've ever been in my life before—is the lost heir of a man who died twenty years ago—a bachelor—a misanthrope, a miser. His only relatives were a couple of cousins, one on his father's side, the other on his mother's. He hated them both. Each of these cousins had a grandchild—one a boy, the other a girl. The old man never saw either of them. Nevertheless he resolved to leave all his money to the boy. It was to accumulate for twenty years. Then the boy was to take absolute possession. Should he die,

however, in the meanwhile, the fortune was to go to the girl."

"Well?"

"Well, the old man had not been dead more than a couple of days or so when the male child mysteriously disappeared. The executors advertised for the child far and wide, giving full particulars of certain marks by which he might be identified."

"Was he not discovered?"

"To the best of my knowledge and recollection, no. But, remember, it was twenty years ago; and I have had no opportunity yet of getting hold of the facts. This young man has all the marks of the missing child, unless my memory is absolutely at fault. But I shall hunt up the newspaper files when I get back to town."

"You think he doesn't know who he is?"

"It looks like it. The policeman who has made inquiries at his lodgings says that he comes from London, that his name is John Lostun, and that he speaks with a strong American accent."

"Is Lostun the name of the child who was kidnapped?"

"There was no talk of kidnapping, as well as I remember, and certainly Lostun was not the child's name."

"The girl, I suppose, is now in possession of the money?"

"That is a question I cannot answer."

"You may be quite sure she is. Her people no doubt got the boy out of the way for the benefit of their own brat. There'll be a sensation when you turn up with the rightful heir."

"Don't go so fast, Sophy! Do you think, if my surmise is right, that I shall close up the whole thing with a sudden snap?"

Sophy looked up with a questioning light in her

large blue eyes. Then slowly the dawn of comprehension stole over her face.

"Oh yes, I see," she answered slowly. "That is where you come in."

"Of course it is where I come in, and where you may come in if you have any woman's wit. Knowledge is a marketable commodity to be disposed of to the highest bidder."

"I see. And your business will be to find out who will bid most?"

"Exactly."

Sophy's face fell, and into her eyes came a look of perplexity. It was the first time she had been brought face to face with a problem of this kind, and she was not quite certain of her bearings. She spoke truly when she told her father she did not want to be a saint; but she did want to be respectable, as she would have put it, and her father's proposal came to her with something of a shock.

"Well, Sophy, what's up now?" Dr. Wilks questioned, after a long pause.

"I was thinking," she answered, without raising her eyes.

"Thinking about what?"

"The turn of the tide."

"Well?"

"Suppose it should be a tidal wave?"

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I quite. But I'll put it another way. Isn't the game a little risky?"

"Risky?" he answered, with a frown. "I risk nothing. I lose nothing, for I have nothing to lose. Don't you see?"

"But is it quite fair? Isn't it what men call hitting below the belt?"

He flushed angrily, and bit his lip.



"Now you are talking of matters of which you know nothing," he said bitingly.

"No, no! I was only asking for information," she said quickly. "You see, Dad, the problem is a new one."

"And a very simple one," he answered, with a majestic wave of his hand. "If you render distinguished service you expect payment."

"Yes, of course, that is perfectly fair and square," she replied.

"Then you have the whole problem in a nutshell, and nothing further need be said."

And he turned and made his way once more to the bedside of his patient.

Sophy had a feeling that a good deal more might be said, but she did not know how to say it. Neither was she sure that anything was to be gained by discussing the subject. In the main she desired but one thing, and that was the betterment of their worldly condition. If that could be accomplished in a perfectly respectable way she would be supremely grateful. Respectability was the Alpha and Omega of her religion. The subtler shades of right and wrong had never come within the circle of her thought.

She began to lay the table for tea directly her father had gone. Their midday meal had been largely a fiasco, thanks to the young man upstairs. Their afternoon tea would have to be a more substantial meal in consequence.

She looked very trim and dainty as she laid the cloth and arranged the cups and tea-plates. Her thoughts were busy all the time, and her lips arranged themselves in alternate pouts and smiles. Her conversation with her father had affected her more deeply than she knew. Her imagination had been touched, and began to play all manner of pranks. She lost herself in a maze of day-dreams.

She rang the bell for Mrs. Pinder to come and fetch the teapot, and when that good woman arrived she had forgotten that she had rung.

"Yes, mum?" Mrs. Pinder questioned.

"Oh, I beg pardon," Sophy said, with a little start. "Did I ring?"

"I expects it was you, miss, as there ain't no bell in no other room."

She sat down on an ancient and somewhat decrepit sofa when Mrs. Pinder had gone, and stared at a print on the wall, but her thoughts were beyond the picture. She was dreaming of affluence, of unlimited cash, of endless luxuries, of dresses by the score. Her father had hinted that she might marry the man upstairs, and share his untold possessions—marry him while he was ignorant of the fact that he was rich.

Her face flushed for a moment, but only for a moment. Why shouldn't she marry him if she could? True, she had never seen him. She might detest him when she saw him. He might be as ugly as sin, and as ignorant as a Hottentot. What did it matter? Unlimited cash would atone for everything. The only thing in this world worth possessing was gold. Her business was to begin to lay siege to this young man at the earliest opportunity.

Any moral scruples she might have had during her conversation with her father were beginning to melt already. The mere dream of gold was having its influence. She was prepared to bow down and worship this little yellow god without more ado.

Love and romance, and all the sweet dreams in which youths and maidens indulge—were they worth considering?

She sighed for a moment, then turned her eyes, to meet her father, who bustled pompously into the room.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FIRST STAGE

JOHN LOSTUN awoke from a refreshing sleep, and found himself alone. In the room below he could hear a faint murmur of voices, but he could catch no word that was said. Through the open window came the sound of the sea washing the pebbles on the beach. Now and then the cry of a seagull floated shrilly into the room, and occasionally the laughter of children could be distinctly heard. But all the sounds came softened by distance, and had the effect almost of a narcotic.

John Lostun lay for several minutes quite still, waiting and listening. Then he struggled painfully to a sitting posture. He was still weak, and exceeding sore.

"I feel as though I had been put through a wringing machine," he said to himself, with a smile. "But it is time I got out of this, anyhow!" And he looked eagerly round the room for any sign of the clothes he had left in the bathing-machine. But though the place contained a good many articles of male attire—some behind the door, and some hung on the bed—he could discover none that belonged to him.

"I wonder whose diggings these are?" he said to himself at length. "I must have given a good deal of trouble to somebody—trouble which I fear will not be easy to repay."

After a while he heard footsteps on the stairs, and he lay down again.

Dr. Wilks came into the room, with a benevolent smile on his face.

"So you are wide awake at last?" he questioned.

"I've been awake some time."

"And you feel pretty fit, I hope?"

"I feel rather flat and sore, as though a steam-roller had gone over me."

Dr. Wilks smiled.

"You will be sore, I expect, for several days. We had very great difficulty in bringing you round."

"The water was rather cold this morning, and the cramp seized me all of a sudden. I can tell you I never experienced anything like it before."

"I can quite believe it. And, what is more, if you had been left to those boatmen you'd never have breathed again."

"You've had experience, I presume?"

"I am a doctor, and, of course, knew what should be done. Moreover, I insisted on my instructions being carried out."

"I am grateful to you, doctor—more grateful than I can say. For, after all, a man's life is all he has. And though this planet could, no doubt, do very well without me, still, I want to live my life and contribute my mite to the great total."

"A very right sentiment, and rightly expressed," the doctor said, with feeling. "Life is a sacred thing—a very sacred thing. And our great profession, of which I am but a very humble member, devotes its all to the great task of guarding and protecting the vital flame."

"I have profound respect for doctors," Lostun said simply, and with sincerity.

"Thank you ! And let me assure you it will always be a satisfaction to me that, under Providence, I was made instrumental in snatching back your life, as it were, from the unseen and the unknown."

"You are very kind. Some day I may be able to return good for good—who knows ?"

"Ah, who knows ?" the doctor said, with emotion. "But service to one's fellows should be its own reward. Indeed, I am more than rewarded already in seeing you here."

"I am sorry to have been such a trouble to you ; but you may reckon on my taking myself off now without any further delay."

"Please do not talk of trouble. It is no trouble at all. It is a joy to see you alive, and if you will take my advice—and I give it as a medical man—you will remain where you are until to-morrow morning."

"Until to-morrow morning ! Oh, that is impossible ! I am occupying someone's room and bed——"

"You are occupying my room and my bed," the doctor interrupted ; "but you need not let that distress you in the least. Moreover, you have had a greater shock than you know ; and I would like to keep you under my eye—at any rate, for twenty-four hours."

"I could not think of imposing on good nature to such an extent," Lostun said with energy.

In the end, however, he was glad to lie still. He made one futile attempt to walk across the room, and then was thankful to be helped back into bed again.

"I knew I was right," the doctor said, with a smile ; "but it was just as well you should make the effort. Now, you must obey instructions until to-morrow."

"I feel as though every joint was dislocated," Lostun said, with a groan.

"No doubt, no doubt ; but you will soon get better

of that. I will send you up something to eat directly. Meanwhile, we ought to know each other better."

"Yes?"

"My name is Wilks. I am, as I told you, a member of the medical profession—a consulting physician, in fact—though not in the West End! But the poor need medical aid as much as the rich."

"Perhaps more."

"And are just as deserving, Mr. Lostun."

"Then you know my name?"

"Through your landlady. She appeared greatly distressed about you."

"You see, I am her only lodger at present, and she has already begun to predict a poor season."

"Do you stay long?"

"I have three weeks' holiday, of which ten days are already gone."

"Ah, we also return in about ten days, and, will you believe me, this is the first real holiday I have had for five years."

"Doctors find it difficult to leave their patients?"

"Most difficult. Be thankful you are not a doctor."

"Oh, I don't know. A man's life consisteth not in the number of his holidays. If he loves his work, that is the main thing, and I love mine so much that I shall not be sorry to get back to it again."

"Ah, now, that is refreshing. What might your occupation be?"

"Well, across the water I'm a member of a society of engineers. In London I'm only a mechanic."

"You are an American, then?"

"I expect so. I have lived in your country just one year."

"And your parents are still in America?"

"I have no parents. I was orphaned early in life, and have had to fight my way unaided and alone."

"Fortunate for you that you were born in America."

"Why so?"

"I speak only from hearsay, of course. But I am told that there is so much more scope for energy and enterprise and talent in America than in England."

"It may be so. I do not know enough about your country to dogmatise; but it seems to me there is a good deal of scope for a man in London."

"You are not disappointed with London?"

"Well, no. It's a trifle antiquated, and a bit slow, but the first impression soon wears off. In America we are in such a hurry that we are always falling over ourselves. I am not sure that the more leisurely Londoner does not get there just as soon."

"Do you expect to remain long in England?"

"Possibly a good many months. Our firm has contracts in England which will carry them over two years, anyhow."

"Ah; then we may meet in London and continue an acquaintanceship begun under such curious—almost tragic circumstances."

"It will be a pleasure to meet you anywhere. I hope I shall not be so ungrateful as to forget how much I owe you."

"No, no, Mr. Lostun. That is a subject that must be barred in the future. It was my good-fortune to be near at hand at the right time, that is all. Now I will go down and see what my daughter has in the way of tea."

Sophy regarded her father when he came into the room with a questioning light in her eyes. She resolutely refrained, however, from speaking. She knew her father was often most communicative when least questioned.

"Ah!" he said, a smile overspreading his face. "I see you are getting ready for tea."

"Yes; we had no lunch to speak of, so I have gone to the extravagance of fried soles."

"Nothing could be better," he said, rubbing his hands. "Soles and tea go very well together. Soles will also suit our patient."

"He has reached the hungry stage, then?"

"I don't think he will say 'No' to a little light refreshment. By the by, my assumption is working out all right."

"Yes?"

"You seem very indifferent about it."

"I am, more or less."

"But you should not be. I see wonderful possibilities. In fact, if we play our cards well we may make a fortune."

"I'll believe that when I see it. Fortunes know better than to come our way."

"It's a long lane, Sophy, that has no turning, and if you will believe me, you have now the chance of a lifetime. You must take him up some tea directly."

"Is he singularly ill-favoured?"

"On the contrary, he's remarkably good-looking. But here comes Mrs. Pinder;" and Dr. Wilks held open the door for her.

To take a large part of one of the soles to Lostun was a self-denying ordinance to both, but the future had to be considered as well as the present.

Lostun looked up with a start when he saw Sophy enter the room behind her father carrying a small tea-tray. She was dressed very simply in white-muslin, with a pink sash about her waist and a band of the same colour at her throat. Her abundant hair was done high on the crown, her forehead was low,



her eyebrows clearly marked, her nose straight, her chin nicely rounded and dimpled, her teeth white and even. Her eyes he could not see, for she seemed too shy to look at him, but altogether she made an exceedingly pretty picture.

• "This is my daughter, Mr. Lostun," the doctor said casually ; then added, with more unction, "And the one solace of my life."

Lostun stammered something about being glad to meet her.

Sophy laid the tray on the bed without a word, while the doctor propped up his patient with pillows.

"It's really awfully kind of you, Miss Wilks," Lostun said, with emotion. "I'm not used to being waited on in this way, and, believe me, I'm downright sorry to give you so much trouble."

Sophy raised her eyes shyly and smiled very prettily, bringing into relief her white, even teeth.

"Please do not speak of trouble," she said ; and she blushed most becomingly and left the room.

"My daughter has more skill as a nurse than half the professionals in London," Dr. Wilks said a little apologetically.

Lostun had no suitable reply to make to that statement, so he remained silent.

"Now, is there anything else I can do for you ?" Dr. Wilks went on. "Don't hesitate to speak if you require anything."

"I have everything I need, thank you," Lostun replied. "Please do not let me detain you any longer."

"I really seem to have fallen into the hands of very kind people," Lostun mused, when he was left alone. "And what a pretty girl the daughter is ! I suppose she is used to waiting on sick people ; but really——" And he began to sip his tea.

Dr. Wilks and Sophy were too intent on getting their tea to talk for several minutes. The sole was done to a turn, and was most appetising, while hunger proved an excellent sauce. But when the jam and bread-and-butter stage was reached conversation began to flow again. Dr. Wilks began it by a point-blank question.

"Well, Sophy, what do you think of him?"

"Not bad."

"No one looks his best, of course, in the garb of an invalid."

"I should think not."

"He appeared to be greatly taken with you."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"He never took his eyes off you from the moment you came into the room, and after you had gone he continued to stare at the door."

"Tired of looking at you, I expect."

"Unfilial and impertinent as usual. But I forgive you. The bow in the clouds is full of promise."

"You mean the beau in the bed?"

"Anything you like, my dear. I'm in the humour to smile at the feeblest joke and to joke on the most mournful occasion. We've caught a treasure."

"Or a tartar."

"He has some very fine qualities. He's supremely grateful to us to start with. He's too honest, in the second place, to be suspicious—the man who mistrusts everybody is at heart a rogue—and, in the third place, he's still in the most impressionable period of his life."

"And what is the next item on the programme?"

"We must cultivate him."

"And where do you come in if I marry him?"

He laughed good-humouredly, and his face beamed.

"That won't be just yet," he said. "Meanwhile, there are several plots to be cultivated. When I have perfected my knowledge and got all my facts beyond dispute, why, then I shall use my knowledge for what it is worth."

• "The price of a secret—eh?"

"Don't worry yourself over my side of the question," he said a little tartly. "You have a sufficient task of your own to accomplish. At last a rich man has come your way. Let's see what your skill amounts to."

Sophy's face flushed and her eyes fell. She might not be overburdened with either heart or conscience, but somehow her father's words touched an uneasy chord in her nature. She was too young yet to be wholly sordid. Moreover, her life had not been without its little romance. Among the six millions of London there was a City clerk who lived at Tottenham who appealed to her as no one had ever done before, or, she believed, would ever do again. All the qualities she most admired he possessed, but he was poor, and, in all probability, would remain poor to the end of the chapter. How could a clerk in a bank ever hope to get beyond a forty-pound villa and cheap lodgings at the seaside once a year? Such a prospect was too terrible to be contemplated for a moment. She had known the daily grind—the mean economies of poverty—from childhood, and she shrank from toiling along the same hard road to the end of the chapter.

And yet there were moments when she felt that poverty with Frank Harley would be better—more ennobling—than riches with anyone else. He helped her somehow into a less sordid region than that in which she daily dwelt. He breathed a different atmosphere from that which surrounded her father.

In the rare moments of vision that came to her she fancied that she might grow into a good woman if she were Frank Harley's wife. He touched into life all that was best in her nature, awoke in her thoughts and ambitions that never came at other times, and made her feel that there was something more in life, after all, than ease and luxury and self-indulgence.

Her father gave her no help in these directions. He could not impart to others what he did not possess himself. A man without vision and without ideals, he steadily dragged his daughter down to his own level.

There were latent possibilities in her, as in all undeveloped natures, but the environment was unfriendly, and so at twenty her outlook upon life was scarcely more inspiring than his own.

Away from Frank Harley, removed from the chance of meeting him, or even of hearing his name mentioned, she became daily more cynical and selfish and flippant.

She envied the people at the big hotels who went out in motor-cars and ate and drank of the best, and wore gowns that were marvels of elegance and taste.

If the chance of being rich came her way, would she not be a fool to discard it? Love and poverty might go well enough together in story-books, but not in real life. Besides, her father knew more of the world than Frank Harley did, and if what he suggested had a sordid and vulgar look, surely the end justified the means.

At any rate, her chance seemed to have come, and she would think twice before she threw it away.

## CHAPTER IV

### HUMAN DOCUMENTS

**D**URING the next ten days John Lostun and Sophy Wilks were a good deal together. They took long rambles along the cliffs and through quiet country lanes. They explored the bracken-covered hills and the leafy plantations ; they had tea together in remote and old-world villages. John Lostun had no thought of harm to himself or anyone else. Sophy Wilks, in his eyes, was just a bright, rather pretty and irresponsible girl, who had not yet begun to look at life seriously. That she could have any ulterior object in being friendly with him was a thought that never crossed his mind. He was so sincere himself that he never dreamed of insincerity in others, especially in one so young and bright and seemingly unsophisticated as Sophy Wilks.

Dr. Wilks watched their growing intimacy with a smile of satisfaction, though he was a little disappointed when one evening Sophy told him that she disliked Lostun intensely.

" Dislike him ? " he questioned sharply.

" I can't abide him," she answered, with a frown.

" But why ? "

" Just because I am expected to catch him and marry him, I suppose," she answered flippantly. " We always hate the things that are supposed to be good for us."

"But you seem to get on very well together."

"Oh yes. I try to make myself agreeable, and if I wasn't expected to make a husband of him, I might get to like him, though I am not sure. He's too big and serious for my liking."

"But you see the advantage of cultivating him, I hope?"

"Trust me for that. It is the first big chance that has ever come my way, and I expect it will be the last, and I'm not such a fool as to let it slip if I can help it."

"You are right, Sophy. He is a big chance. I have been calculating what old Bob Digby's fortune at compound interest would amount to in twenty years. It is something prodigious."

"It would be a nice kettle of fish if he should prove to be the wrong man, after all, or if, being the right man, he should be unable to prove his claim."

"You are not likely to fall in love with him, you say?"

She laughed scornfully.

"I should as soon fall in love with a rhinoceros," she answered.

"Then no harm will be done in any case," he replied. "I should not like my little girl to get her heart cracked over the business."

She laughed again.

"You trust your little girl, as you call her, to look after herself." And she tossed her pretty head defiantly. "I have got clean through the sentimental stage."

"Doubtful," he said, knitting his brows and stroking his chin. "Sentiment is a hardy plant, and sprouts again when you think it's dead."

"Well, there will be no sentiment in the present case, anyhow;" and she turned and walked out of the room.

Dr. Wilks was left to take his walks alone. He did not go far, as a rule. Exertion was never to his taste.

During all his life he had been inclined to take the easy path. Others might fight and struggle and conquer. 'He preferred, whenever possible, to lie still and drift, and trust to the chapter of accidents for whatever might turn up.

He looked at the failure of his life on the whole philosophically. He had sense enough to see that he had only himself to blame. He was not without ability. As a young man he passed his examinations with a fair amount of credit, and if he had only stuck to his work with energy and determination he might have won a respectable position for himself in the ranks of his profession. But he preferred idleness to activity. It was always easier to yield to temptation than resist it; to do to-day what he could put off until to-morrow was repugnant to his nature.

He was not as a young man vicious or unprincipled, but he gradually became both. There was a steady and unconscious slackening of his moral fibre. He drifted steadily without knowing it.

At the age of twenty-seven he married a woman who was ten years his senior. She had neither beauty nor intellect, but she had £150 a-year in her own right, and that seemed to him almost affluence. Poor woman, she idolised her husband for two brief years; and then mercifully fell asleep, and was soon forgotten.

People said it would have been a double mercy if her year-old baby had followed her, but the baby lived and thrived in spite of hardship and neglect. Albert Wilks tolerated her at first for the sake of the £150 a-year that descended to her, but later on he got to like her. She was pretty and good-tempered and interesting.

His profession dwindled to nothing. He ran himself into debt in all directions. He managed to get through the Bankruptcy Court, and started again. Sometimes he backed a horse and won, but more

frequently he lost, and his debts of so-called honour remained unpaid.

Yet through all his pride never left him. He was proud of his personal appearance and vain of his attire. He rarely descended to any less imposing headgear than a silk hat. He wore a frock-coat on all occasions, and in the summer-time invariably appeared in patent-leather boots.

At the time our story opens he had a surgery and consulting-room in Shoreditch. It was a corner shop with plate-glass windows. The lower half was painted black, on which there were sundry announcements in gilt letters, the most conspicuous being that patients could have medical advice free.

He lived in a little house in Tottenham, and travelled to and fro by 'bus or train. He made no attempt to exercise his profession in the neighbourhood in which he lived. His nearest neighbours did not know what he was or how he earned his living, nor did they trouble to inquire. He was "something in the City," which was true of tens of thousands of others. He went away fairly early in the morning, and did not return, generally speaking, till bed-time.

Sophy kept house and did most of the work. Had she been kept less busy she might have brooded more, and grown even more bitterly discontented with her lot. Every day was like every other day—the same round of dull, unexciting duties, the same mean economies, the same struggle to make both ends meet.

Now and then, when the weather was fine, she went for an afternoon up West. It was a relief to saunter up and down Regent Street and Bond Street, and stare at the shop-windows and get ideas for her next hat or gown. But she generally got more pain than pleasure out of these excursions. She saw so many things she



wanted which she knew she could not get. Poverty was irksome enough in Tottenham, but it seemed doubly so when jostled by wealth and fashion in Regent Street.

Of course, she had her pleasures in a small way. There were afternoon teas, and At Homes, and local entertainments and church bazaars; but in the main life was drab and uninteresting. She had no mother to counsel her, no brothers and sisters to quarrel with, no relatives to pay unexpected visits. At times she felt ready to do anything desperate, or even wicked, if only to break the deadly monotony of life.

She was in one of her most pessimistic moods one evening in late June, when her father returned in a state of considerable excitement.

"Look here, Sophy," he said, taking a roll of bank-notes from his pocket and smoothing them out on the table. "What do you think of that, my girl? There's gratitude for you!"

"Why, father," she exclaimed excitedly, "where did you get so much money?"

"A grateful patient!" he exclaimed. "A Polish refugee whom I had cured."

"How kind of him! Did he know the value of the notes?"

"If he didn't that's his look-out, not mine. Anyhow, we'll have a holiday on the strength of it."

"Oh, that will be lovely!"

"And we'll get away before the rush commences. Lodgings will be cheaper, and there will be a better selection."

"But what about your patients, father?"

"Oh—oh, it will be easy enough to get a locum!" he stammered. "Anyhow, I'm determined to have a holiday, even if my patients die."

The next day Sophy discussed the matter with her

neighbours. She felt quite important and supremely happy. Several days passed before Poppleham on the Norfolk coast was decided upon, and then followed more excitement in securing lodgings and hunting up trains.

The first week was decidedly disappointing. The season had not commenced, and the place was undeniably dull. There was no pier, no pierrots nor nigger minstrels, and, worse still, there were very few visitors. But with the rescue and resuscitation of John Lostun everything was changed. Life became full of meaning and purpose for both.

While Sophy and Lostun wandered through the lanes and plantations, Dr. Wilks sat on the cliffs and dreamed. The generosity or the ignorance of the Polish refugee seemed like the turn of the tide. If he had been a religious man, he would have said it was Providence. Nothing like it had ever happened to him before. And how strangely one thing had led to another. For if it had come a month sooner or later, or if they had decided on any other place than Poppleham, they would not have met Lostun. And if Lostun had not come near being drowned he would never have discovered the marks on his body by which he could be identified anywhere. It was all so wonderful that he almost wondered sometimes if it could be true.

The hours passed like a dream as he sat staring at the sea, weaving his fancies and shaping his plans for the future. He saw no reason why he should ever trouble Shoreditch again. He had scarcely any doubt now about his facts. That this John Lostun was old Bob Digby's missing heir seemed beyond dispute. Bit by bit Sophy was extracting from him the story of his life. There seemed to be scarcely a missing link in the chain of evidence. He was getting impatient for the holidays to end, so that he might

bring pressure to bear on those who were profiting by John Lostun's absence and ignorance.

Sophy, on the contrary, was sorry the days were passing so quickly. She had found a new interest in life, and was getting a considerable amount of enjoyment out of it. She was delighted at her own cleverness, and was coming round to the belief that she was a born actress.

She liked John Lostun no more than at the first. She hardly knew why. He had many of the qualities she admired so much in Frank Harley, but they affected her in a different way. Frank made her feel that there was a good deal of worth and merit lying latent in her. Lostun, on the contrary, made her feel that she was the meanest little hypocrite that ever walked the earth. Frank encouraged her, Lostun stirred up all her latent antagonism. Perhaps for that reason the task of baiting him was so enjoyable. It gave her a new sense of power; it fed and inflamed her vanity.

It wanted but a day of their return to London. They had gone out for a stroll as far as a place called Nebo, a heather-crowned hill, from which a beautiful view could be obtained of the surrounding country. Sophy was dressed in white muslin and looked her best. She was also in her most friendly mood.

Lostun was thoughtful and serious, and less disposed to talk than usual. For a long time they sat in silence, looking down over a jumble of heather and bracken covered mounds to the sleepy little village of Upper Poppleham, and beyond the village again to the distant sea.

It was a delightful prospect, and one which local artists often painted. Landscape and seascape were combined in a quite unusual way.

"Do you know," Lostun said at length, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, "I think I shall be sorry to go back?"

" Yes ?

" A week ago I was kind of aching to be at my work again. But this place is delightfully restful—don't you think so ? "

" Yes, I suppose it is," she answered, looking up at him with a smile.

" And when I get away into the country like this, and listen to the wind making dreamy music among the heather and pines, it always starts my memory back along the track of my life, and I wonder and wonder when and where and how I started."

" Yes ? " she questioned, with a look of sudden interest coming into her eyes.

" Most people know," he said, looking off beyond the village in the hollow to the distant sea. " They know the place and the date. But I have no infancy and there is no one to tell me."

She caught her breath sharply.

" No infancy, Mr. Lostun ? " she questioned, in tones of sympathy.

" I never knew my parents," he went on quickly. " It is just twenty-two years ago this month, I take it, that I was found early one morning in one of the principal streets of St. Louis alone. The weather was hot, and I was quite happy, and evidently enjoying my freedom. But the strange thing is, no one ever inquired for me."

" How curious ! "

" A policeman took charge of me, and it was announced by handbill, and in all the local papers, that I had been found, but no one came to claim me. What had become of my parents I have never discovered to this day."

" And you have no recollection of any earlier time ? "

Sophy questioned slowly.

She was anxious not to show any undue curiosity, lest

she should check the stream of his confidence, and yet she was intensely desirous of hearing the story out, for this seemed like the final link in their chain of evidence, the crowning proof that this was Bob Digby's lost heir.

"I think sometimes that I remember things as one remembers blurred bits of a dream, but my memory can fish out of the murky night nothing definite. The shadows that flit before me sometimes may be but shadows of dreams. I fancied, for instance, when I saw the sea for the first time a few years ago that I had seen it before; but I must have been mistaken."

"Dreams are curious things," she said, following the direction of his eyes.

"Life is curious," he said thoughtfully. "The whole problem of existence oppresses one."

"What became of you when no one claimed you?" she questioned, after a pause.

"Oh, an old couple out West asked permission of the authorities to adopt me. They had no children of their own, and they wanted a new interest in life. I dimly remember that long journey by train, and the far longer journey it seemed in a jolting buggy. That to me was the beginning of my life."

"Were they kind to you?"

"Very. Yes, yes; they did their best for me, and when they died they left me all they had. It was not very much, but it helped me through college and gave me a start."

For a while there was silence, then Sophy said, with a little sigh—

"What a wonderful experience you have had."

"Oh no; it has been humdrum enough in the main. The satisfactory thing about it is I have found the work I love. I'd rather be an engineer than one of your English earls."

"Oh no."

"But I would. Think of the possibilities! An earl is stereotyped, as it were. He's just there and has to stop. But an engineer! Oh, bless you, there's no end to the possibilities! We're always finding out something fresh!"

And his eyes flashed as she had never seen them flash before.

That evening Sophy repeated the story she had heard to her father. Dr. Wilks rubbed his hands and chuckled.

"It's all as plain as a pikestaff!" he said. "The boy was kidnapped by somebody, smuggled off to America, and deserted. But by whom and for what purpose? Sophy, my girl, the problem is becoming more and more interesting."

"The friends of the girl smuggled him, no doubt, so that she might possess the property. You don't want two guesses on that point."

"Then they must be found, my dear. Oh, I see money in this at several points. I never had a chance before, Sophy. People think that money can be made out of work. That is all nonsense. You may work the skin off your fingers, and die in a workhouse. No, no; money is to be made by exploiting other people. Look at all the people who have grown rich. Have they done it by hard work? Look at me! Have I not worked hard enough? I tell you, Sophy, work is a fraud. But, thank Heaven, my chance has come at last!"

He waved his hand dramatically.

"It will be lovely," she said, with sparkling eyes, "to be able to do what you like and go where you like, and have all the dresses you want, and—and all that!"

"Sophy," he said grandiloquently, "if you and I play our cards well, we shall live in the West End yet."

## CHAPTER V

### THE FIRST MOVE

LOSTUN and the Wilkses said good-bye at Poppleham Station. They were returning to London by different routes. Sophy was particularly gracious, and Dr. Wilks was effusive.

"You will come and see us soon, won't you, Mr. Lostun?" Sophy said, in her most winning manner. "You know, you will be welcome as the flowers in spring."

"It is very kind of you," he said in his direct fashion. "I shall most certainly look you up."

"We are very simple people, as you know," Dr. Wilks interposed, with a broad smile, "and we live the simple life."

"Miss Wilks has told me that you exercise your skill mostly among the poor," Lostun answered. "It is very brave of you."

"Intensely interesting, Mr. Lostun, but sadly unremunerative from a commercial point of view."

"Oh, well, so long as we have enough to provide for our daily wants, what more do we need?"

Sophy's lip curled. John Lostun irritated her when he talked in that strain. Her father, however, beamed benignantly.

"Your views and mine coincide exactly," he said. "Beyond what one needs to provide for his simple

wants, money becomes a burden, and—and, I may add, a snare."

By this time the train was sighted, and Sophy was all animation again. When the train stopped John helped his friends to find seats, and later on gave an eye to the luggage.

Sophy leaned out of the window for a last good-bye.

"I shall be quite counting the days till we meet again," she said, with a blush.

"Will you?"

"Of course I shall. Won't you?"

"I owe you so much that I shall be almost afraid to intrude."

"Tut, tut!" Mr. Wilks said, looking over his daughter's head. "Friendship must not speak in such terms."

"Then you will soon see me at Tottenham," Lostun said, with a laugh.

So they parted.

He walked back to his lodgings in a very sober mood. On the whole, he felt thankful he was returning to London by the next train. Popplecham seemed different now that the Wilkses had left. The doctor had been a good friend to him, and Sophy had made a charming companion. He wondered if her prettiness would ever pall on him, and if her flippancy—real and pretended—would in time get on his nerves.

That she was very pretty there was no denying, and as fresh as a spring flower. She could not be classed among the strong-minded women, nor was she in any sense of the word profound. But, then, he wondered if anybody wanted profundity in a woman. Sophy was a typical Londoner—smart, quick-witted, self-confident, and aggressive—but beyond that there was little to call for remark or condemnation.



During his journey back to London she occupied a large place in his thoughts. He had never been brought much into contact with the opposite sex. His boyhood had been spent on a lonely farm in the Far West. The young women of his acquaintance in those days were large of limb and coarse of texture. They worked in the farmyard and in the fields, and saw nothing more refined than the upholstering of a backwoods' parlour. Contrasted with these young women, Sophy seemed a perfect dream of loveliness. Her skin was so white, her hands were so small, her figure was so dainty and symmetrical, her voice so soft and musical, that he wondered if she had many superiors in all England.

One face only had he seen that charmed him more, and that was a face that flashed upon him one day in a London omnibus. He was travelling from Victoria to King's Cross, and at Bond Street a young lady got in and seated herself nearly opposite. He thought then, and he had thought ever since, that hers was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. He glanced at her as often and as long as he dared, and when she alighted at the entrance to St. Pancras Station he was strongly tempted to get out and follow her.

He had looked for her a thousand times since then, had hoped every day, and a dozen times a day, that he would meet her again. Her face haunted him with a persistency that he could not understand. He could remember every expression of her sweet and sensitive mouth.

The days passed away, and lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, but no second glimpse of that face had been vouchsafed to him. He was still looking for it, and looking in vain. He had looked for her in Poppleham, and quite unconsciously. He

looked for her in the train as he travelled back to town. He looked for her in Liverpool Street when he alighted, and for a moment his heart almost stopped ; then, with a little sigh, he turned back to look after his luggage.

As he rumbled away in a growler to his rooms in Bloomsbury he took himself gently to task for indulging in foolish fancies. Now that his holidays were over, he would have to settle himself down to work again. On the whole, he was not sorry to be back. He had enjoyed his few weeks of idleness, but idleness soon palls on the active and strenuous man.

He spent the evening in unpacking his things and restoring his bedroom to its normal order ; then he settled himself down in his little sitting-room to a pipe and book. It was quite bed-time, but he knew he should not sleep if he retired. His book soon lay wrong side up upon his lap, and his eyes followed the brown wreaths of smoke that floated up from his pipe. Was it only imagination, or did the wreaths of smoke actually shape themselves into the semblance of a human face ? His lips broke into a smile more than once. Sometimes it was Sophy's face he saw—pretty, piquant, audacious. At other times it was a gentler face, with more character in it—the face of the unknown for whom he had looked in vain.

He was at the office early next morning, and before the day was out he was so absorbed in his work that Poppleham and the Wilkses were completely banished from his mind. But when evening came, and the remains of his frugal dinner had been cleared away, he was touched almost for the first time by a sense of loneliness and of a desire for companionship. He wanted someone to talk to, someone with whom he could discuss the news of the day, or who would entertain him with light and airy chatter.

He missed the doctor and Sophy. During the last week of his stay at Poppleham he had spent all his evenings with them. The doctor was so genial and so hospitable that he would not be denied. Now he was conscious of something missing. There were undoubtedly drawbacks to living alone.

On the fourth evening he took the first available train to Tottenham, and after some difficulty found Rose Villa, 239 Higson's Avenue. The villa had nothing to distinguish it from hundreds and thousands of other villas in the same neighbourhood. There appeared to be miles of them, run up by jerry-builders in the cheapest and flimsiest manner possible.

His ring at the door was answered by Sophy herself, who welcomed him in her most winning and gracious manner. She was dressed, as usual, in light and flimsy material, but it became her remarkably well. At her throat she wore a bunch of red roses.

"We quite expected you last evening," she said, ushering him into a tiny box of a drawing-room. "Father came home early on purpose. To-day he has had to go out of town, and I really don't know what time he will be back."

"So you are alone?" he questioned.

"Quite alone!" she answered, with a laugh; "but I'll promise not to hurt you. Now, what am I to get you to drink?—for you look both hot and thirsty."

"I am thirsty," he replied frankly. "The truth is, I did not stay for my usual cup of coffee."

"Which means that you would like a cup of coffee now?"

"If it would not be giving you too much trouble."

"It will be no trouble at all," she answered gaily. "Only I shall have to deprive you of my company for a few minutes. The truth is, my maid is out."

This was an euphemistic way of saying that the charwoman had returned to her family.

"Oh, then, I cannot allow you to make coffee for me," he said stoutly. "Really——"

But she had disappeared into regions where he could not follow her, so he set to work to take stock of the room.

Evidently the doctor had carried out his theories respecting the simple life in the furnishing of his house. There was not a single thing that savoured of extravagance. Everything was of the simplest and least expensive kind. By the time he had completed his survey of the room Sophy was back again.

"I cannot promise you that my coffee will be to your taste," she said, with one of her most winning smiles; "but you will make the best of it, I know, for my sake."

"I am sure it will be delicious," he answered gallantly; "and I see you have brought a cup for yourself."

"I thought I might as well keep you company," she answered. "And, by the bye, you may smoke if you like. Men always smoke with coffee, don't they?"

"I believe it is getting to be pretty general," he answered.

"You must look upon this as Liberty Hall, you know. Father smokes in every room in the house."

"Including the drawing-room?"

She laughed a little raucously.

"It's silly to call a box like this a drawing-room," she answered. "I wonder sometimes if I shall ever have a house that is big enough to breathe in."

"Are you fond of big houses?"

"I would like one or two big rooms," she answered

evasively. "I think they are healthier; don't you?"

"I suppose they are. I have really never given much thought to the subject."

"Of course," she answered, darting a shy glance at him, "one may be just as happy in a little house as in a big one—perhaps more so."

"I quite agree with you."

"Did you ever wonder what you would do if you had heaps of money?"

"No."

"But you are ambitious, like other people?"

"To excel in my work, to improve on what has gone before, to do something that nobody has yet succeeded in doing."

"That would be splendid, wouldn't it?"

"It would be worth living for."

"And if you succeeded, would there be a lot of money at the end of it?"

"I have really never thought of that," he said.

"You see, money is only a secondary matter. Your father, when he is doctoring the poor, does not think of the pay."

"Not he. You see, father is one in a thousand."

"I admire him very much," he said frankly. "I am sorry not to see him this evening."

"But you will be running out again?"

"If you will let me, I shall be delighted to come."

"Come as often as you like, and stay as late as you like. We shall always be pleased to see you."

Big Ben chimed half-past eleven when John Lostun entered his lodgings that evening. He had not intended remaining so late, but Sophy seemed so lonely, and was so genuinely grateful for his company, that he had not the heart to tear himself away. It

seemed almost cruel to leave one so young alone and unprotected in the house.

Ten minutes after his departure, Dr. Albert Wilks returned, flushed and excited. He had dined on his way home, and he had dined well, if not wisely. He was in the best of humours, however. His outlook on life never seemed brighter than at present. The only thing that troubled him was a scarcity of ready cash; but as that had been his normal condition for a great many years, he was not unduly anxious on the point.

Still, he conceived a score or two pounds would be a godsend to him just then. He wanted to avoid precipitancy in his actions, but while he was waiting for the right moment to strike his purse was getting painfully lighter, and his credit, unfortunately, was not of the best.

Sophy's greeting was effusive, if not affectionate.

"Well, father," she questioned, "what news do you bring?"

"Very much what I expected," he answered a little thickly. "The girl is in possession of the money."

"I knew it would be so," she replied. "And, of course, wasting it right and left?"

"In a way, yes. But not on herself—or, at least, not wholly on herself. But it's such a big amount that it will take a lot of wasting."

"Of course, now that she has come into possession of the money, she'll have to square the people who kidnapped the real heir."

"On that point my information is a little at fault yet," he answered thoughtfully. "Of course, the girl herself did not kidnap the boy, for she is a few months younger than he. Moreover, she can have been no party to the kidnapping. I want to get at

the real culprits, so that I can put the screw on them first. When I have squeezed them dry 'I will turn my attention to the girl.'

"And how long will you keep Lostun in the dark?"

"As long as it is necessary for my purpose."

"But you may go on bleeding the girl for years."

"Exactly. If you fail to land the young man, we may gain more by keeping him in the dark than by telling him."

"But as soon as I have brought him up to the sticking-point you let light into his mind?"

"For a consideration. You see, I have to consider myself as well as you."

"An unselfish enterprise, I am bound to admit."

Dr. Wilks laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"In this world, Sophy, it is every man for himself, and he who accepts any other rule of life is a fool."

"It hasn't done much for you, so far!" she said spitefully.

"Perhaps not, but I should have fared worse if I had acted on any other rule."

"And when do you expect to draw your first dividends?"

"It is impossible to say yet. It may be in a day or two; it may be in a month."

"Meanwhile, I suppose we shall have to mortgage next quarter's allowance?"

"If we do, it won't be the first time, Sophy——"

"I do trust it will be the last!" she snapped.

"Trust me!" he replied grandiloquently. "Before the year is out we shall be rolling in riches."

"Anyhow, I wouldn't swop my chance for yours!" she said in the same spiteful tone.

"Your chance?" he questioned, raising his eyebrows.

Yes ; my chance. Your chance is to squeeze the usurpers, and I wish you joy of it My chance is to hook the genuine heir, and it's going to be easier than falling off a stool."

" I hope it may prove so. But don't be precipitate, Sophy. Men are timid things in love affairs, and are easily scared away."

" I know what I'm about," she answered flippantly ; " but it's quite time we were both in bed." And with a formal good-night she turned and left the room.



## CHAPTER VI

### LOOKING AHEAD

AS the days passed away, and grew into weeks, Dr. Wilks got irritable and not a little depressed. The task which he had set himself proved to be more difficult than he had expected. It was not easy to get information after a lapse of twenty years, and the one person who had profited by the disappearance of Bob Digby's heir was not—by all accounts—at all elated at her good fortune.

Dr. Wilks spent several days at Longhampton, where Robert Digby lived and died ; but a new generation had sprung up, and he could find only one here and there who even remembered his name. He was afraid to pursue his inquiries too openly, lest his motive should be suspected, or lest a mystery should be scented which might put an untimely end to his hopes and expectations.

He found at length a garrulous inn-keeper on the outskirts of the town who had known Robert Digby fairly intimately, and who was disposed to talk about what he called the old days.

"He were a mean 'un," he said, alluding to Digby. "Ay, as mean as they make 'em. He'd skin a flint for a farden, he would—ay, an' spoil a threepenny knife a-doin' it."

"Not a profitable business that," Dr. Wilks remarked.

"No, but it just shows his sperrit. But he made brass i' other ways, an' then he spent nowt. He was always on the save. He'd never 'ave a penny in his pocket, for fear he should be tempted to ride in a 'bus. Oh, I tell you, there weren't no meaner man in Longhampton."

"He never married, I believe?"

"Married? Not he! That would mean two people to keep. Besides, no respectin' woman 'ud look at him. 'Miser Bob' his neighbours called him. He lived in a little house which has been pulled down since, and haaf starved himself, some people say."

"And what became of his factory?"

"Oh, he sold that afore he died—and sold it, too, for a sight more'n 'twas worth. He was always cute where brass was concerned, though it never did him no good. He never got a penn'orth o' comfort out of all his money."

"His heirs have got all the comfort—eh?"

"Well, now, there again the sperrit of the man comes out. He wouldn't let none o' his relations that was livin' then, and who badly wanted it, 'ave a penny—not he! He locked it up for twenty years, so that nobody could touch it."

"But somebody has got it now?"

"Ay; but somebody as don't want the trouble of it, an' 'ud rather be without it—at least, that is what people say."

"That's rather strange, isn't it?"

"Well, it's just as 'ow you look at it, I reckon. You see, he left it to a boy—a grandson o' a cousin of his, or summat of the kind. But the boy couldn't touch it for twenty years, by which time he'd be twenty-two or three. But in case the boy died afore the twenty years were up, a girl would get it. Well, curiously, the

old man hadn't been dead long afore the boy disappeared, and, of course, the girl has come in for the lot."

"Was there any proof forthcoming that the boy was dead?"

"Not that I ever heerd of. In fact, the boy's faather always stuck to it that the boy was alive, and would turn up in good time. But people think now that he did that to bluff the gal and her mother into believin' that the brass 'ud never come their side the house."

"What good would that do him?"

"Oh, well, he were a curious sort of a chap were Harry Digby! Clever as they make 'em, and as hare-brained. You see, his first wife died soon after the kid were born. She were a fine young woman, people say. Well, after she died he got married again to a skittish crittur, with no more sense than a sheep—purty enough to look at, people say; but, lor, what is looks without brains?"

"And is this Harry Digby still living?"

"No. He got injured in the works somehow—clever dog, but careless!—an' he never got over it."

"And his wife?"

"Oh, she's got wed again! Those shallow-pated women are generally cutest in 'ookin' men."

"So they say. But you'll excuse me asking questions, won't you? Your story is wonderfully interesting."

"Ax as many questions as you like. I've not much else to do but talk, these times."

"Then, to return to the boy who was lost. Was it considered very strange at the time?"

"It were. Nobody could quite understand it. You see, nobody 'ad no interest, as it were, in getting rid of the boy."

" There were the friends of the little girl."

" Except her mother, there was nobody as cared two straws for the gal. Besides, the mother was in bed at the time—broke down in nursin' her husband and grief at his death—an' people do say as 'ow she didn't know till long after that her little gal was in the runnin'."

Dr. Wilks scratched his head and looked puzzled. His immediate prospects had become decidedly clouded. The market value of his secret appeared to be growing less. The theory that the boy had been kidnapped by some person or persons interested in the girl was left with scarcely a leg to stand on. And yet that the boy had been kidnapped he had the best possible proof. A child of two and a half years could not find its way to the United States alone. Somebody had taken the child to America, and had deliberately deserted it in the streets of St. Louis. But who was the person, and for what purpose was it done?

Dr. Wilks called for another whisky, and passed on his cigar-case to the inn-keeper. He was puzzled, and a little despondent, but by no means in despair.

" You say that Harry Digby always insisted that his boy was alive?" he questioned at length.

" Down to the last, they say."

" Yet he never produced the boy?"

" My b'lief is—an' most people think the same now—that 'twas all bluff. He didn't like the gal's mother, nor the gal, for that matter—though everybody says as 'ow they're terrible nice people—an' he just did it to torment 'em. He said as 'ow the boy was bein' eddicated so as to fill his station proper, an' all that, an' that at the proper time he'd show hisself and claim his own."

" And do you think anybody believed him?"

" Oh ay, I think so! He was a clever dog, was

Harry Digby, an' 'ad a most persuasive tongue. He could a'most make people believe as black 'was white."

"And did the girl and her mother believe him?"

"Well, I've heerd say that they did, an' that they never built on comin' into the money, either on 'em. What is more, they do say that the gal never wanted the money, an' sticks to it now that it ain't hers."

"Yet she is spending it very freely, I'm told."

"Not on herself. Fact is, she's turned herself into a kind o' charity organisation, an' is spendin' nearly all the income on the sick an' the poor."

"People do take strange freaks," said Dr. Wilks musingly.

"They do, an' that's a fact. But old Bob's will was nearly enough to freet anybody."

"Why so?"

"Because he said he expected it 'ud bring a curse to whoever got it—said as 'ow it had been a curse to him—dried up in 'im all the springs o' joy an' 'ope, an' made 'im the most hated man i' Longhampton."

"I'd risk the curse to get hold of the money. What say you, Mr. Crawley?"

"Well, I'm noan so sure. When I were thirty years younger I hankered arter money, like most other folk. But at my time o' life, what good would it do me? Besides, I've lived long enough to see that it ain't money as makes folks happy or contented."

"But it goes a long way in that direction, Mr. Crawley. Besides, a greedy old man's chatter about money carrying a curse with it isn't worth listening to."

"Maybe it isn't, and maybe it is."

"And do you know if old Digby's executors are still alive?" Dr. Wilks asked, gulping down the last of his whisky.

"One on 'em is. You see, he appointed three. Two

of them were oldish men at the time, and it occurred to 'im that they mightn't live for twenty years. So he appointed a young man along with 'em, David Smart by name. He was clerk at the time in Mr. Newbury's office. Mr. Newbury was a lawyer, an' one of the executors, and I believe it was he who suggested David as the third."

"And he is the only one of the three who is alive?"

"Ay! Poor Dixon died a year after old Digby went. An' about five years ago Mr. Newbury dropped down sudden. Smart, however, still keeps on the old name along with his own."

"And what sort of man is this David Smart?"

"Oh, he's a very able man, and 'ighly respected! He's a little too free with the Scriptures for my likin'; but that's neither 'ere nor there."

"What do you mean by being too free with the Scriptures?" Dr. Wilks questioned, with a smile.

"Oh, well, I don't mean nothin' bad! Some people look 'pon it as a virtue. But I always say that if a man is livin' fair an' square he needn't be allers draggin' slabs o' religion into his conversation, willy-nilly, as it were."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Crawley."

"Smart, they say, 'as done well by old Digby's estate, investin' the yearly income wi' great judgment, an' seein' that nothing was allowed to get out o' repair."

"A thankless task, I should say."

"Well, it's just as you take it. Maybe 'e didn't regard it as a trouble. I'm told he still advises the gal in 'er charities, and them things. Some people think as 'ow they'll make a match of it."

"Oh!" and Dr. Wilks suddenly elevated his eyebrows.

" Maybe only talk, of course, for he's nearly double her age."

" And he's never been married ? "

" No. Some people say as 'ow he's waited for the gal all these years."

" Why should he wait for her ? "

" Wanted to, I s'pose. Saw as 'ow she were a pretty lass, and well favoured."

" And, with a lawyer's disinterestedness, put all present chances aside—eh ? " and Dr. Wilks made a mental note to the effect that he would have to get a little further information respecting Mr. David Smart.

Dr. Wilks's next excursion was to Daveley, a thriving and picturesque village some five or six miles from Longhampton. Here lived the mistress of old Bob Digby's thousands with her mother.

Dr. Wilks approached this part of his inquiry with more than ordinary interest and curiosity. A young girl who, having come into a large fortune, was spending it mainly for the good of others was something of a *rara avis*, to say the least of it. In his heart he sincerely hoped that the information he had received was not true. If it were true, his sercet would have no value in her eyes, and no terror ; and to attempt to blackmail her would be useless.

It was not difficult to pick up information in Daveley respecting the Maxwells. They were important people now, and occupied a position of great influence.

Mrs. Maxwell, on the death of her husband, had started a school for girls in Longhampton. It was a very modest beginning, but it grew. She was a woman of great refinement and strength of character, and her influence over children grew almost into a proverb.

As the years passed away her school increased. She added house to house, and teacher to teacher, until, finally, she took Winterholme, a large mansion overlooking Daveley, and surrounded by extensive grounds.

As a school for girls Winterholme became known far and wide. There was always a waiting list of pupils on the books, and parents were willing to pay anything reasonable in the way of fees for the privilege of getting their girls into it.

Mary Maxwell inherited a good deal of her mother's spirit and temper. She had the same innate refinement, the same breadth of outlook, the same love of books and learning. In addition, she had a sweet graciousness and charity that people said she inherited from her father.

When she was fourteen, Mary was sent abroad to continue her studies, and spent four years in Germany and Switzerland. If she was to carry on her mother's work, Mrs. Maxwell was anxious that she should be fully equipped for the task.

Long before Mary's education was finished Mrs. Maxwell found herself in possession of an income that was more than sufficient for all her wants, while her staff of teachers had been selected with so much care and judgment that she had not to worry herself in the least about the management of the school.

Hence it happened that the prospect of possessing old Robert Digby's thousands became less and less enticing—particularly in view of the pious opinion expressed in the old man's will that he expected the money would prove a curse to whoever got it.

- At the beginning of her fight with the world, she used to think bitterly of old Digby's money gradually accumulating and doing no one an atom of good. She



had no wish to possess the whole of it even then—at least, she tried to persuade herself that she did not—but she did long for a few hundreds of it. With a growing school, and the necessity for extensions, she often found herself sorely pressed for money, but as the years passed, and money began to flow in more freely, very different feelings took possession of her.

Harry Digby's bluff that his boy was all safe—that he was being educated for his great position, and that in due time he would emerge from his obscurity and claim his own—ceased to have any sort of terror for her. She sometimes said that she hoped the boy was alive, that she was quite able to provide for her own daughter, and that she had no wish whatever that her child should ever touch the old miser's gold.

Perhaps she did not mean quite all she said, but Harry Digby's bluff made her almost angry sometimes. She had her full share of pride, and, after all, there was something in the thought of her daughter being an heiress. Vanity has its roots in all of us, and Mrs. Maxwell, with all her strength of character, was only a woman.

In the early days there had been a whisper—and, of course, it reached her ears, as all such whispers do—that the boy had been got out of the way in the interests of little Mary Maxwell. But time proved the whisper to be so absolutely absurd and impossible that people forgot that it was ever in circulation. Mrs. Maxwell, however, could never forget it. Hence, whenever she spoke of old Digby's money, it was in a tone of scorn and contempt far in excess of what she really felt. Mary would listen to these mild outbursts and say nothing, but the seed thus unwittingly sown took root and grew. The half-feigned contempt of the mother became a reality in the child. She grew up

to abhor the very thought of the miser's hoard. She hoped in no half-hearted measure, and even prayed, that the true heir might turn up alive.

When the twenty years had nearly expired, and Harry Digby had been gathered to his fathers, and there was no evidence, and scarcely a presumption, that his son was alive, Mrs. Maxwell's feelings underwent a slight change. After all, wealth had its compensations. It opened up possibilities undreamed of by the poor. It paved the way to social circles she had read of in books, but had never penetrated. It gave an influence to those who possessed it that had never rightly been measured, and it commanded a respect and deference dear to the human heart.

Mrs. Maxwell's vague and elusive dreams began to take definite shape. She protested still that she did not want money for herself, that she had enough to supply her moderate wants. But with Mary it was somewhat different. She was in the spring-time of her life, and with a large fortune at her back her chances and opportunities would be so much better. There were county people who might be cultivated. There were stylish young men, who were heirs of titles as well as of estates. There were a great many things, in fact, which a large fortune made possible what otherwise would never appear above the horizon.

When she first hinted the tenor of these later thoughts to her daughter, Mary looked up in surprise.

"Why, mother," she exclaimed, "I thought you hated the name of old Digby's money."

"For myself, my dear, I want none of it," she said mildly. "But if, in the order of Providence—as seems likely—it should fall into your hands, it will open up for you quite a new and a very important sphere."

"I sincerely hope it won't fall into my hands," Mary answered earnestly.

"Do you really mean that, Mary?"

"Do I really mean it, mother?" she questioned, with a startled look in her eyes. "Am I in the habit of saying what I do not mean?"

"No, no, Mary. Please do not interpret me so literally. You know as well as I do that it is often difficult to find words that will express the finer shades of thought."

"But I have no finer shades of thought," she answered, with a musical laugh, "respecting old Digby's money."

"Stung by Harry Digby's words and hints, I have sometimes, I admit, spoken very strongly—more strongly perhaps than the occasion or the circumstances required. At present we have to face the fact that within a year, to all human appearances, this large fortune will fall into your hands. This will mean a great opportunity."

"And a great responsibility," Mary added quickly. "Oh, I do wish little Johnny Digby had never disappeared!"

"It may be that you will be able to use the money more wisely than he would do," Mrs. Maxwell answered.

"It may be that the money will curse me, as so often it curses people."

"You are thinking of poor old Robert's words in his will?"

"Perhaps I am, though I am not the least bit superstitious. He only uttered a commonplace, but a commonplace that is so often true. I honestly believe that wealth is more often a curse than a blessing."

For the rest of the year Mrs. Maxwell found herself more or less at war with herself. She wondered sometimes if she had deteriorated a little, or whether she

had grown more broad-minded with age. She found excuses nowadays for what once she unhesitatingly condemned. Was this a gain or a loss? Was the desire to see her daughter shine in society evidence of a larger charity or of an increasing laxity? Was it a growth in grace or a fall from grace?

She gave different answers to these questions, according to the mood she was in. But most days she prayed, and prayed very devoutly, that the sin of bowing down and worshipping the yellow god might never be laid at her door.

## CHAPTER VII

### DR. WILKS CONSTRUCTS A THEORY

AFTER Dr. Wilks had picked up all the information he could in the village of Daveley, he made straight for Winterholme, ostensibly, of course, to inquire about fees, curriculum, etc., but in reality to see Mrs. Maxwell, and, if possible, her daughter. It required courage, and he felt more nervous than he had done for a considerable time past, but he argued that it would be folly to depend on mere hearsay when he had the chance of first-hand information.

He walked up the long drive in the warm sunshine, looking far more important than he felt. He was nearly always tormented by a vague fear that other people would see him as he saw himself. He was anything but heroic in his own eyes, and it was difficult to simulate a part that was the opposite of the truth.

He was shown into a large and handsomely furnished room by a pleasant-faced maid, and was left to entertain himself by examining the pictures and books.

Then suddenly the door was pushed open, and Mary Maxwell entered. He could hardly repress a look and movement of surprise. He always considered Sophy pretty, but Sophy was not to be mentioned in the same day with the girl who now stood before him.

"I am sorry, Dr. Wilks," she said, glancing at his card, "but mother is engaged just at the moment.

If you can wait a few minutes she will see you."

"I am not at all driven for time," he answered, glancing at his watch. "I will wait with pleasure. I presume I have the honour of addressing Miss Maxwell?"

"My name is Mary Maxwell," she answered, with girlish candour.

"I am pleased to see you, indeed," he said pompously, and with effusion.

She glanced at him questioningly, but did not reply.

"Your praise is on all lips," he went on. "Your good works——" But he did not complete the sentence. Before he had time to do so she had disappeared through the open door.

"An awfully pretty girl," he mused, as he sank into an easy-chair, "but touchy. Strange, though, for most girls like being complimented. I fear I started on the wrong tack. I wish she hadn't bolted so suddenly!"

The minutes passed slowly, and Dr. Wilks got up again after a while, and looked at himself in a mirror. He had dressed himself with care for the occasion. His silk hat, which he still held in his hand, was quite new, his frock-coat without a crease, his scarf-pin sparkled like a real diamond. Indeed, he looked very much better than when we first met him on the beach at Poppleham. His holiday had done him good, and on the strength of his improved prospects he had patronised a better tailor.

Mrs. Maxwell came into the room at length, and found him studying with interest an engraving on the wall.

He turned suddenly, and bowed in his best professional manner.

"I am sure Mary would be glad to be relieved of the responsibility," was the frank reply.

"You do not mean to say that?" he questioned, with uplifted eyebrows. "Her fortune and the way she dispenses it give her quite a unique position."

"That is no doubt true," Mrs. Maxwell answered, "though it is a position I am afraid she does not value. She has no liking for publicity. To be the dispenser of another's money is not the position she would have chosen for herself."

"No, not the dispenser of another's money, surely?" he said, with a smile.

"She has her own view of the matter, and I have ceased to argue with her," Mrs. Maxwell said in a somewhat injured tone.

"Then you do not quite see eye to eye?" he questioned quickly.

But Mrs. Maxwell pulled herself up suddenly. She had already said more to this smooth-spoken stranger than she ever intended to say. She began to wonder how it was that she had been induced to talk about the matter at all. She was not in the habit of doing so, nor were visitors in the habit of alluding to a subject so personal to herself and Mary.

"I am afraid, Dr. Wilks, you will have to excuse me now," she said hurriedly and in some little confusion. "If you would like to see over the classrooms I will send a maid to show you."

"I am quite satisfied, madam, that they are everything that could be desired," he said in his blandest manner. "My one regret is that you have no opening next term."

"We are considering enlarging the building," she said, "but that, of course, will not be for some little time yet."

"Could you do so without destroying its symmetry?" he questioned. "In its present form it has a very stately appearance. I was much struck with the view from the lower end of the drive."

"Another wing would really improve its appearance," was the answer. "And then my daughter is anxious to provide a number of scholarships for the daughters of people in decayed circumstances."

"What a noble girl she must be. Really, Mrs. Maxwell, I shall always consider it an honour that I have been permitted to see her and speak to her. Nothing so appeals to me as benevolence and self-sacrifice." And he laid his hand on his breast and smiled unctuously.

Mrs. Maxwell's heart warmed again towards her visitor. She had never before met a doctor who displayed so much religious feeling on so short a notice.

"I am glad my daughter has taken to ways of usefulness rather than to ways of pleasure," she answered, with a faint smile.

"You must be more than glad, madam; you must be proud," he said effusively. "And I am sure you must ardently hope that no untoward circumstance may ever check the flow of your daughter's benevolence."

"Since she persists in regarding herself only as a steward *pro tem.*, I think it would be a relief to see her relieved of all responsibility;" and Mrs. Maxwell took a step toward the door, as if to indicate that the interview was at an end.

Dr. Wilks apologised in appropriate language for the length of his stay, and then bowed himself out of the room in his best professional style. But no sooner had he got into the open air than his countenance



changed. The unctuous smile vanished in a moment ; the moist, benevolent eyes flashed angrily.

" It is clear there is nothing to be gained in that direction," he mused, setting his lips tightly together. " The girl's a fool, that's clear, and the mother is unable to reason her out of her folly. The old woman would like to finger some of the money herself, and I don't blame her. But the girl, like the little donkey she is, sets her back up against the wall and refuses to budge. ' Steward,' eh ! What nonsense ! And ' Steward *pro tem.*' ! Thinks the real heir will turn up some time. Well, in that she's nearer the truth than she knows. But the point is, where do I come in ? Begins to look as though Sophy held the only trump-card. But while she is waiting for him to propose we may get into Quicer Street. ' While the grass is growing the horse is starving.' Besides, she may miss him. But, no, the game is not up yet ;" and he smiled once more and quickened his pace.

" It is unfortunate, though," he continued ; " and the girl is such a fool. I reckoned on finding her a veritable gold-mine. Any sensible girl who loves money, and believed in having a good time, would have parted with thousands to have the real heir kept in ignorance and out of sight. I really am a most unlucky dog. Fancy a woman setting no value on a fortune ! The thing is almost too silly to be believed. Those people with consciences are about the most tantalising people in the world." And he swung through the lodge gate as though he would like to annihilate somebody.

Later in the day he found himself once more in Longhampton. His next prospective victim was David Smart, lawyer, executor, and would-be lover. He hardly knew what he expected or hoped for. His

thoughts were almost too hazy to be shaped into words. His shadowy surmise might end in smoke. Still, he was determined to follow it up for what it was worth.

He had one clear and definite fact on which to build. Little Johnny Digby had been kidnapped. There could be no doubt about that. On no other possible hypothesis could his turning up in America be explained. Then arose the inevitable questions, Who had kidnapped him, and for what purpose? Of course, the obvious answer was that the friends of Mary Maxwell had done so in order that she might inherit the fortune. But the obvious answer in this case was evidently not the true one. There ~~was~~ no one at the time who cared a straw about Mary Maxwell except her mother, and she was ill in bed, and did not even know the terms of old Bob Digby's will.

Starting again from the indisputable fact that the boy had been kidnapped, a new direction would have to be taken. As a rule, when people take risks they don't do it for other people, but for themselves. The next question therefore was, Who would be likely to benefit by the removal of the boy and the substitution of the girl?

Dr. Wilks scratched his head long and vigorously, but he could get no answer to that question. The idea of holding the child for a ransom had been knocked on the head by the fact that at the earliest convenient moment the child had been deserted, and apparently no effort had been made to keep him in sight or to discover his whereabouts. Nobody had applied to the executors for a ransom, and the fortune had gone to the girl by default.

What was the use, therefore, of turning his attention to David Smart?

Dr. Wilks was unable to give a reasoned or con-

sistent answer to his own question. David Smart, by all accounts, was a respected and prosperous member of the legal profession, was a shining light in the local religious world, was the last surviving executor of old Bob Digby's will, was a friend and adviser of Mary Maxwell, was a bachelor of forty-five, and, common gossip said, was willing to marry the heiress.

In all this there seemed no possible point of contact between David Smart and the kidnapped heir. Nevertheless, Dr. Wilks resolved to follow up the vague and nebulous suggestion that floated in his brain.

In the first place, he tried to put himself in the place of the lawyer's clerk, and this is how he evolved his theory—

"I am a youth of nineteen or twenty," he said to himself. "I am in a lawyer's office. I am poor and extremely ambitious; my very poverty enhances in my eyes the value of money. I am asked to become one of the executors of a rich man's will. As a clerk in the lawyer's office I know the terms of the will. The money is to accumulate for twenty years, and then fall into the hands of a boy, or, failing him, a girl. Suppose the boy should die, what a chance there will be for the man who marries the girl. She will be twenty-two at the time, and I shall be forty-two—married, perhaps. But why need I marry? A man at forty-two is in his prime. Besides, if the boy should chance to die, I shall be brought a good deal into contact with the girl. Very likely the entire management of the estate will fall into my hands. The other executors are elderly, and life is uncertain. Of course, in twenty years the girl may be a very undesirable acquisition. She may be as ugly as sin, and as ill-tempered as a

wasp. Still, for such a fortune a man would tolerate a good deal. On the other hand, taking into account her parentage, she will very likely grow into a passably good-looking woman, possibly into a very handsome woman. As executor and adviser I shall be on the spot. Love is a matter of propinquity. No one else will have anything like so good a chance.

"But all this presupposes that the boy is out of the way. He is a healthy lad, but sadly neglected by his stepmother, who is a vain and silly goose, and thinks of nothing but her own pleasure. Under such circumstances the boy may die, but the chances are he won't. Neglected children often thrive most. If he lives, of course, the chance of marrying a young and pretty heiress falls to the ground.

"I brood over the thing. The idea becomes more and more attractive. At the age of forty-two or three I may be the richest man in Longhampton. I may become mayor of the town. I may go into Parliament. Provincial mayors have before now become Cabinet Ministers. As the husband of an heiress there are unlimited possibilities.

• "But the boy! The boy! While he is in the way the dream is folly. I become obsessed by the picture I have conjured up. It glows in such attractive colours that I am loath to give it up. It fills my imagination to the exclusion of everything else. The bait is all the more tempting because of my present poverty.

"Is the off-chance of winning a heiress worth the risk? I am not greatly troubled by moral scruples. I am not going to kill the boy. Is it possible to whisk him away to the Colonies or to the United States and lose him? If so, he won't be likely to suffer much harm. Boys when they grow up are able to

look after themselves, and are, in fact, all the better for being thrown upon their own resources and compelled to fight their own way in the world. For a young fellow of twenty-two or three to come suddenly into a fortune might be the worst thing that could happen to him. 'Money is the root of all evil,' the Bible says. Old Bob says in his will that he expects it will prove a curse to whoever gets it. I may be the means of turning away the curse from the lad, and if the girl gets it I shall be old enough to protect her.

"Is the chance worth the risk? If so, the sooner the thing is done the better. It will be comparatively easy to kidnap a child. The boy is not old enough yet to tell who he is, or where he lives. Hence the longer the thing is delayed the greater the risk.

"Can it be done? If it can, it shall! But how——"

Dr. Wilks pulled up at this point. He had got as far as he could get. But he prided himself that within inevitable limitations he had constructed a very plausible theory. It had its weak points, he knew. For instance, Mr. David Smart might be a very different man morally and intellectually from what he had imagined him to be. In fact, instead of imagining himself to be David Smart, he had imagined that David Smart was Albert Wilks, which was an entirely different thing.

Only on the assumption that David Smart was as unprincipled as himself would his theory hold water for a moment. But as far as common report went, the lawyer was nothing of the kind. He was a very religious man, much given to quoting Scripture, and highly respected in the town. On the face of it, therefore, he was engaged on the wildest goose chase that

mortal man ever attempted. But then, on the other hand, there was no other chase possible—wild or tame, sane or insane. The boy had been kidnapped by somebody, and by some very improbable person, and it was his business to find out who that person was.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A STEP FARTHER

THE more Dr. Wilks pondered over his theory, the more its wild improbabilities came into view. He had been started on the track by a bit of gossip retailed by old Levi Crawley to the effect that David Smart wanted to marry the heiress. But surely there was nothing wonderful in that. He had seen Mary Maxwell since his interview with Crawley, and he was not a bit surprised that the lawyer wanted to marry her. The surprising thing would be if he hadn't. She was a girl that almost any man would like to marry. He would like to marry her himself; and if he thought there was the smallest chance of success he would start on the enterprise at once. In his heart he commended the lawyer for his good taste.

Then it was said that he had waited for her for twenty years, which, if true, showed his worldly wisdom, but was no sort of presumption that he had anything to do with the removal of the boy. Most likely he never thought of Mary Maxwell as a possible wife until all efforts to find the missing heir had proved futile.

The fact that he had managed the estate with care and judgment had no bearing on the question. Any honest, upright man would have done the same. Indeed, there was nothing whatever in David Smart's

conduct to justify the smallest suspicion of foul play. Yet Dr. Wilks clung to his theory with a tenacity that was a surprise even to himself.

On his return home he talked the matter over with Sophy.

"And is that all the evidence you've got?" she questioned, with a saucy toss of her head.

"For the present."

"Then I think you had better stick to Shoreditch and your pills;" and she began to strum on the piano.

"You are a very impertinent girl," he answered angrily. "A most impertinent girl."

"I don't see it!" and she wheeled suddenly round and faced him.

"You don't? Then I'm sorry for you."

"You can be as sorry as you like," she answered pertly, "but that will help neither you nor me. Here am I going into debt all over the place, while you are spending the only bit of income we have in chasing rainbows."

"I admit I'm disappointed in several things," he said snappishly. "But who would ever expect to find a woman such a fool as not to care for a fortune?"

"Wait till I marry John Lostun and we get possession of it," she said, with a laugh. "I tell you we'll knock the dust out of things."

"You may. But Lostun himself belongs to the careful sort."

"I shall be able to twist him round my little finger," she said, with a toss of her pretty head.

"Don't be too confident," he answered in more measured tones. "Those simple-minded, straightforward men are often difficult to catch."



"Difficult! Why, he is more than two-thirds in love already."

"Has he been to see you again?"

"Of course he has. He is unable to keep away. He talks about being lonely in his diggings, as if I didn't know what that meant. I wish I didn't dislike him so much."

"You'll get over that in time."

"I don't know. He's so frightfully serious."

"Oh, nonsense. He's a most good-tempered fellow."

"I don't mean that he's solemn," she replied.

"That's quite another thing. But he looks at everything so seriously. He thinks, for instance, that girls never ought to flirt, or tell fibs, or break promises. Fancy!" and she puckered her lips into an expression of scorn.

"That may be all to the good," he answered.

"When you've got his promise he'll not try to back out of it."

"Don't you think I'd better try to get it soon?" she questioned. "Your eggs appear to be all addled."

He winced, and his face grew painfully red.

"I wish you had a less biting tongue," he replied.

"Do you, Dad?" and her manner changed suddenly, and crossing the room she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Why can't you always be nice, Sophy?" he questioned, his face relaxing.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, her eyes growing moist. "How can I when life is such a grind and such a fraud? Oh, I hate all this intrigue and meanness! Sometimes I feel ready to kill myself and end it all."

"Now you are growing hysterical," he said in a tone of alarm; "that will never do. I fear you have been keeping too late hours."

"Have you seen the lawyer?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you intend to?"

"Most certainly."

"And suppose you can get nothing out of him?"

"Then I shall have to fall back on you."

"Am I your last card?"

"You are, Sophy, and, what is more, I don't think you will fail me."

She looked up into his face for a moment and sighed. She felt as though she had had the burden of her father all her life. Instead of being cared for by him, she had had to care for him. It was her own small income that kept the house going. Nearly all he earned he spent on himself.

There were times when she felt very fond of him and very sorry for him. There were other times when she despised him and almost hated him. She was not surprised at this. She knew that her own character was full of contradictions. She felt sometimes as though she were two persons rolled into one. She had moments of vision when she saw life as it ought to be, moments of aspiration when she reached out her hand towards goodness and charity. Then the other side of her nature would assert itself, and she would become flippant and selfish and insincere.

For a moment the better side of her nature was coming again into sight. She looked at the mean and sordid game her father was playing with loathing. She loathed herself for being a party to the fraud.

The mood, however, did not last long. The passionate desire for something she had never possessed reasserted itself quickly. Love in a cottage might sound romantic, but she had had enough of the cottage with its skimpings, and contrivings, and economies.

She wanted life as she had seen it in wealthier neighbourhoods. She wanted ease, and luxury, and pleasure, and fine dresses, and servants to do her bidding. Give her these things, and love and romance might hide themselves in a cellar.

"I'll bring him to book as soon as ever possible," she said, after a long pause.

"You mean Lostun?"

She nodded, and then silence fell again.

Several weeks elapsed before Dr. Wilks had completed his investigations into the character and antecedents of David Smart. It was a delicate operation, and taxed his skill to the utmost. Nearly all the people to whom he talked were great admirers of Mr. Smart, and their praise of him was apt to be somewhat excessive.

The first man of the group was an official of the religious community over which David presided.

"A great man is David Smart," he said to Dr. Wilks—"a very great man. A mighty, broad-minded man."

"In what way?"

"He believes in real religion, he do. Not in sects, mind you. That's where the trouble comes in. Religion is all broke into fragments, and all the sects a-fightin' among themselves. Mr. Smart couldn't a-bear that. He was too broad-minded! He wouldn't have none of 'em."

"No?"

"He said religion weren't sectarianism. So he founded the Brotherhood of Saints, and soon got a lot of people round him like-minded with himself. I were one of the first to join."

"I see! Showed his hatred of 'sectarianism by starting another sect."

"No, no! There you're quite wrong, sir. The Brotherhood is absolutely unsectarian."

"Is it? Mr. Smart has never married, I believe?"

"Oh no! The Bible says that he who goes to war should go without encumbrance. David Smart's a soldier of the Lord."

"And has he any relatives?"

"Distant ones. He has a sister who married a farmer away down in Cheshire. But she went to America with her husband more than twenty years ago."

"Are they living still?"

"I don't know. He rarely talks about anything but the work. He's that single-minded."

"Are his distant relatives in Longhampton?"

"Not that I knows on. I believe he came originally from Manchester. He's made his own way, as it were."

"Why did his sister and her husband go to America?"

"To better their fortune, I expect, but I never heerd. I've heerd somewhere as how he was rather a bad lot, but I don't speak with no sartinty."

Dr. Wilks interviewed several others during the next week or two, who bore similar testimony. A few were non-committal. Mr. Smart bore a good reputation. He was regarded as a clever lawyer. He was painstaking, and, what was much more to the point, was conscientious.

No man, however good and upright he may be, can go through the world without making a few enemies, and there were people in Longhampton who had no love even for Mr. David Smart. They were in a minority, no doubt, and some of them were not of much account. But in forming any true estimate of a man, it is just as well perhaps to hear what his enemies as well as his friends have to say about him.

Dr. Wilks fell one day across a man whose hatred of Mr. Smart was quite cordial, and who expressed his feelings with a frankness that was refreshing.

"The biggest hypocrite in Longhampton," he asserted, "and the most consummate liar."

Dr. Wilks held up his hands in well-feigned alarm.

"Oh, you needn't look shocked," said Mr. Brindley, who was a hard-working grocer in the town. "I know what I'm talking about, and I tell you another thing. There's no humbug on earth so detestable as your religious humbug."

Dr. Wilks smiled, and looked distressed.

"Those are strong words," he said, "very strong words."

"But none too strong," was the answer. "When a man uses religion as a cloak to cover up his meanness, somebody ought to tell the truth about him. David Smart is a smug, canting hypocrite who will prate religion with his tongue while his hands are in your pocket stealing your money."

"But what proof have you of this?" questioned Dr. Wilks mildly.

"Proof? Didn't he rob me? Stripped me of every stiver I possessed!"

"I never heard of his doing so," said Dr. Wilks, with a smile. "And you certainly look fairly prosperous at the present time."

"Looks go for nothing," Mr. Brindley said, with a grunt. "But there was a time when I was well off. I might have retired, but I was fool enough, acting on Smart's advice, to sue the corporation for infringement of rights. I hadn't a leg to stand on from the first, and Smart knew it. Yet the rascal egged me on and just bled me white. He and the town clerk had rare pickings. The town clerk defended the cor-

puration and pocketed the fees. Smart represented me till I had nothing left. The two rascals were in collusion. Neither of them wanted the case settled while there were any pickings to be had. When I hadn't a feather left, Smart, of course, threw up the case. And all this time he was breathing piety down at the temple of the Saints, and flinging hunks of Scripture at the heads of sinners generally."

"But I wonder you did not tell the truth about him."

"I did. But, bless you, he had forestalled me. He had been telling his friends for weeks—as a secret, of course—that I had no case; that he had urged me from the first not to proceed with it; that I was the most obstinate man he had ever met; that he was charging me only nominal fees; that, as a matter of fact, he would be out of pocket by it, and that he wouldn't be a bit surprised if in the end I did not turn round and abuse him.

"Well, when in the end I did turn round and abuse him, everybody laughed. Nobody believed me, or sympathised with me. Oh, I tell you, for an all-round liar David Smart takes the cake!"

"Why is it, then, he is so generally trusted and respected?"

"Because most people are gullible, and are content to take a man at his own face value. But I could find you a hundred men in Longhampton who mistrust him profoundly."

"Will they tell you so?"

"No, they won't! Smart has a good deal of influence in the town. A lot of people are afraid of him, and regard it as good policy to say nothing—a lot of people he has lent money to, and it would be awkward if he were to foreclose. The rest look upon him as

a saint, and would no more think of doubting him than of doubting the New Testament."

"Still, he must have some very fine qualities," Dr. Wilks remarked.

"He has. He can make a lie look like truth, and blasphemy sound like a benediction. To hear him preach, you'd think John Wesley had come back again; and when he gives, the secret is all over the town in twenty-four hours. I don't think there's a man in England who has earned so big a reputation for charity on so small an outlay. Fine qualities! He ought to be legal adviser to Tammany."

"My dear friend," Dr. Wilks said, with a laugh, "you haven't a good word to say of him."

"No, I have not. But that's not because I am uncharitable, mind you."

"But because you are prejudiced, eh?"

"I may be a little. But, prejudice or no prejudice, you can't close your eyes to facts; and when once you've got the clue, the rest is inevitable."

"And so you've been driven to the conclusion that he's a bad lot, and not to be trusted?"

"That's the solemn truth," Mr. Brindley answered seriously; "and, what is more, he comes from a bad lot."

Mr. Wilks pricked up his ears instantly.

"Oh?" he said interrogatively.

Well, perhaps I oughtn't to say bad exactly, though from all I've been able to gather, they were nothing to boast of. He never mentions any of his relatives by any chance—never has done."

"Has he any relatives?"

"I don't think he has any near relatives; at least, not in England. He had a sister who went off to America all of a sudden more than twenty years ago.

She was a flighty sort of a party, I've been told, and her husband was something of a scapegrace."

"Had they a family?"

"They took two children away with them from Liverpool at any rate, though it is said they only had one of their own."

Dr. Wilks grasped the arm of his chair suddenly, though his face betrayed no sign of emotion.

"Then you have been making inquiries into his family and antecedents?" he questioned, with a smile.

"Well, not exactly. If news has come my way, I've made a note of it, that's all. I've an idea there'll be a bust up some day."

"In which way?"

"Well, as to that I don't know; but wrong generally comes to its own in the end as well as right. He's carried a lot of sail for a good many years, and he started on nothing."

"But he has a large practice, hasn't he?"

"That's more than anybody can say. He effects a good many mortgages for the Saints, I'm told, and he swindles a simpleton now and then as he swindled me; but it takes a good deal of wind to keep his sails full."

"I presume he was paid pretty well for managing old Digby's estate?"

"Well, yes, I think you may safely presume he was, though Bob Digby left no provision of that sort in his will."

"You are really hard on your townsman," Dr. Wilks said, with a deprecatory smile.

"Perhaps I am, but I wouldn't trust him round the corner with a sixpence, and he knows it. I've told him to his face what I think of him. The Digby



estate may come out all right. If he marries the girl, nobody will hear anything about it."

"And has he any chance with the girl, think you?"

"Oh yes, I think so! You see, he has known her from childhood—kind of watched over her, studied her, flattered her, pandered to her whims, made himself agreeable on all sides—got her to lean on him, as it were; made her feel that she couldn't do without him."

"Strong position that."

"Couldn't have a much stronger. Oh yes, I think he'll get the girl! I fear so, at any rate; and if he does he'll be able to snap his fingers at the world, and at everybody in it."

Dr. Wilks returned to London feeling that he had got a big step farther.

## CHAPTER IX

### SELF-REVELATION

MEANWHILE, John Lostun was being slowly entangled in the net that Sophy Wilks had spread for him. To do him justice, he was quite unsuspecting of danger, and quite innocent of any serious intention. His experience of the opposite sex was exceedingly limited, and was confined to the other side of the Atlantic.

He seemed to be unaware of the fact that in America girls were much more independent than in England—that the social circle was widely different; that girls received their young men friends into their homes without much regard for their elders; that they took long walks together on terms of equality; that they even made chums of each other without the most distant thought of love or matrimony.

That the social code and social etiquette might be different in London from what obtained in New York or Philadelphia never occurred to him, and he had no one to tell him. He had no idea but that he might be on the most friendly terms with Miss Wilks; that he might visit her in her home as often as he liked; that they might walk out together whenever they felt disposed, and that nobody would give the matter a second thought, and least of all Sophy herself.

Sophy was careful not to undeceive him until she

had him, as she imagined, perfectly safe. His American upbringing, as well as the sincerity and ingenuousness of his character, gave her her opportunity, and she made the most of it. She led him on step by step in a perfectly simple fashion. Had she cared for him in the least, her task would have been more difficult, and some chance word or look might have warned him off dangerous ground.

Sophy, however, had no difficulty on that score. Her perplexity lay rather in the opposite direction. She liked him no better than when they used to ramble together through the woods or along the cliffs at Poppleham, and sometimes she had considerable difficulty in hiding her dislike.

John, on the other hand, was genuinely fond of her company. She was bright and vivacious, and utterly inconsequential. He liked her flippancy, her banter, her irresponsibility. After hard and strenuous days, it was a relief to run out to Tottenham and spend an hour in Sophy's company.

He had a feeling sometimes that at heart she did not really care for him; that it was simply because she was kind that she encouraged him to come. Possessed, therefore, of the idea that she really did not much care for him, he exerted himself more than he otherwise would have done to please. He had no idea that he was being cleverly snared. His very honesty and sincerity were a peril to him. He did not see much of Dr. Wilks. Sophy explained that his professional duties became more and more exacting, and that grateful patients often insisted that he should go home to dinner with them, and would take no denial.

On the whole, John Lostun was not sorry that the doctor was so little at home. He liked Sophy, for

some reason, much better than he liked her father. He felt grateful to the doctor for saving his life—he believed he would always feel grateful—but his gratitude never took on the hue of affection. There was something in his manner that unconsciously repelled him.

Not that he was in the smallest degree suspicious. He honestly believed that the doctor was what he professed to be—a hard-worked surgeon devoting his energies mainly in relieving the sufferings of the poor; but he was conscious from the first that they had little or nothing in common.

This, of course, was true also in the case of Sophy, but with a difference. He liked Sophy because she was the antithesis of himself. It was just because she wasn't serious, or even sensible, that he liked to spend an hour or two every now and then in her company. As an occasional effervescing draught, she was delightful, though he conceived that one might easily get too much of her.

In all those long weeks, while Dr. Wilks was engaged in following up his clues, the idea of making love to Sophy scarcely occurred to John Lostun, and yet in a sense he did make love to her. He courted her smiles, and made distinct efforts to win her favour. His visits to Rose Villa were remarked upon by Sophy's neighbours and seriously discussed by her friends.

Poor Frank Harley was almost in despair. He was sure that Sophy loved him, and that if he were only in a better financial position she would accept him without a moment's hesitation. It was torture to him to hear the gossip that circulated among Sophy's friends. What could she mean by walking out with a stranger? He was sure she did not care for him. Could it be possible that she would fling love aside

for the sake of the difference between three hundred a year and one hundred and fifty ?

It must be explained that when Sophy was alone with Frank she nearly always showed the more serious and, therefore, the better side of her character. In Frank's eyes she was no vain, shallow, irresponsible chit, but a woman capable of deep feeling. Those who imagined she was shallow, according to Frank's theory, did not know her. So Frank loved her for her depth and seriousness, and John Lostun liked her because she was so volatile and gay and irresponsible.

John Lostun only thought of marriage now and then. When the rain was pouring down on the glistening street, and the wind was sweeping the sere and sodden leaves in all directions, and there was no one in the house to whom he could talk, and his heart was hungry for companionship, his thoughts would turn almost instinctively in the direction of love and matrimony.

Standing at the window with his hands in his pockets, watching the rain coming down and listening to the wailing of the October wind, he would conjure up mental pictures of a pretty little home in the suburbs, where he would never feel lonely and a bright face would always be near to greet him. And yet, curiously enough, it was rarely Sophy's face that he saw. It was a far more beautiful face than hers that shaped itself before his mental vision, a face that he had seen only once—a face that confronted him for just half an hour and then vanished.

He still scanned the faces in the streets almost unconsciously. He never expected that his hope would be realised, and yet he hoped on. What would happen if he met her walking alone in Bloomsbury he did not know, and he did not stop to inquire.

It was not a subject to be reasoned about. It stood outside the region of debate. It belonged to a world of fancy rather than of fact. The face that he had seen just realised in flesh and blood his ideal of beauty ; that was all that could be said. The face might be no index of the character. The mind might be as vacant as the eyes were bright, and the disposition as peevish as the smile was sweet.

He sometimes wondered if face and character ever bore any close resemblance to each other. He had known some very beautiful souls in very homely bodies. One of the most splendid characters he had ever met had a face like a nightmare, while the prettiest girl on the steamer on which he had crossed the Atlantic was a simpering, giggling idiot. If he could have spoken to the girl he had seen in the omnibus, he might have been disillusioned in five minutes. Possibly her face was the only endowment with which Nature had favoured her.

Sophy was not his ideal, but what might be quite as much to the purpose, she was to a large extent the complement of himself. She would supply what he lacked. Her brightness and smartness and flippancy might furnish just the tonic he sometimes needed.

So the autumn months wore slowly away, and Sophy waited for the ripe apple to fall into her lap. Frank Harley made one last appeal to her. He met her one evening a mile from home, and his heart gave a great bound at the sight of her face.

Rushing up to her, he grasped her hands almost before she was aware of his presence.

" Why, Frank," she exclaimed, a look of pleased surprise coming into her eyes, " what are you doing here ? "

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"And what are you doing here?" he asked, smiling broadly.

"I'm waiting for the 'bus," she answered, her eyes clouding suddenly.

"Let's walk," he said eagerly. "It will be ever so much pleasanter."

"I don't mind if I do," she answered, after a short pause. "I'm in no particular hurry to get home."

"You are not expecting Mr. Lostun to-night?" he questioned, a look of pain coming into his eyes.

"Not to-night, Frank," she answered in her most graciously flippant manner. "He was over last evening, and stayed till nearly eleven o'clock."

He bit his lip and was silent for a moment. It hurt him when Sophy talked in that heartless manner. He felt that she was doing violence to her better nature, and trying to spoil the nobler side of her character, which he admired so much.

"It gives you no pleasure to walk with me now?" he questioned.

"Oh yes, it does. You are my oldest chum, you know, and I hope we shall always be friends."

"But why do you flirt so outrageously with that Mr. Lostun, Sophy? You know you do not love him, and that you never will love him."

"Well, what of that?" she questioned saucily.

"What of that?" he answered slowly. "Surely, Sophy, that is everything? He is too good a man, by all accounts, to be trifled with. Do you want to break his heart as you have nearly broken mine?"

"Hearts don't break nowadays, Frank," she answered lightly. "I heard of you walking out the other day with Nora West."

"And did you care?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I did. And yet, why should I? You have a perfect right to choose your own companions as I have to choose mine."

"I have not walked out with Nora West, Sophy," he said a little sadly, "and I have no intention of doing so. You know you are the only woman in the world I care for. Why can't we be lovers again as we used to be?"

"We never were lovers, Frank," she said hastily. "That is, we were never engaged."

"Not formally, I admit. But we understood each other surely? And you can't deny you cared for me."

"Oh, I don't intend to go back on anything I have said," she answered, with a slight shake of her voice. "But then, what is the use? Suppose you love me better than you love anybody else, and suppose I love you the same? Well, what then——"

"I know what you are going to say," he interrupted in hurt tones. "I know I can't afford to marry yet."

"And your mother may live for another twenty years. Besides, as far as I can see, you will never be better off."

"I never expect to be rich," he answered uneasily, "though I shall certainly get promoted in time. But surely, Sophy, money is not everything? People may be just as happy on two hundred a year as on two thousand."

"Some people may, Frank, but, as you know, I have never pretended to be one of that sort. I have always pined for something different; for life and gaiety, and theatres and beautiful dresses, and balls and parties and all that."

"Such things may be all right in their place, Sophy, and sometimes I don't deny I rebel against the daily



grind and the scanty pay. But suppose you marry a man who can give you all those things, and you don't love him? Won't you be just wretched, and won't you grow more wretched every day?"

"And suppose a woman were to marry a man she did love," she answered pertly, "and she got pushed into a mean little house in a mean little street. And she had to toil and contrive and pinch herself from January to Christmas. And there were children, perhaps, and sickness and bad times, and she had to do her own cooking and washing, and she could never make herself look nice, never have any pretty frocks, never go anywhere, never have any pleasure. And her hands got red and coarse, and all her good looks shrivelled up, and there was no prospect of anything but—but the grave. Wouldn't she be wretched and wouldn't she grow more and more wretched every day?"

"Oh, I don't know, Sophy. If they loved each other, I think they might be happy under those conditions."

"You do, do you? Well, I don't."

"And you mean that parable for me, Sophy?" he questioned plaintively.

"Yes, for you and for myself. Look here, Frank," and she turned her eyes full on him and spoke quite seriously. "You and I are no longer children, and we should be fools to act like children. I don't deny that I like you awfully, and I don't expect I shall ever see anybody else that I like as well. You are fond of me, I know, and you think I am a heap better than I am. I am good at times, just by fits and starts, but never for long together. But what does it all amount to? You can't live on it. It won't pay rent or satisfy the baker."

"Oh, Sophy, Sophy, you hurt me when you talk in that hard, heartless way."

"Better be hurt now and have done with it, than that we should nag at each other for the rest of our days without any chance of escape."

"But, Sophy, we should be as well off as tens of thousands of other people who are quite happy."

"That may be, Frank, but it isn't good enough for me. I've known nothing but this genteel poverty since I was born, and I'm tired of it; and if I get the chance of something better I'm going to take it."

"And do you intend to marry this Mr. Lostun?" he questioned, a little angrily.

"That all depends. But you may be quite sure of this: I'm not going to marry poverty."

"That means that you'll not marry me?"

"You shouldn't worry me for any plainer answer, Frank," she said crossly. "I was never intended for a poor man's wife. I should only make him miserable and myself also."

"And so if a rich man asks you to marry him you'll do so whether you love him or no?"

"Shouldn't I be a fool not to?"

"No, Sophy, you would be very foolish if you did, ay, and worse than foolish. Think again, Sophy. Think what marriage means. Would you sell yourself, body and soul, for money? Don't you see how wicked it would be?"

"I don't see anything wicked in it at all," she said flippantly, "and I object to being preached to."

"I am sorry," he answered sadly, after a long pause. "You are just trampling upon your better self. Your soul protests against what your lips have been uttering. You could be a noble woman if you would give yourself a chance."

"Could I?" and she laughed scornfully.

He was silent for a while. Then he said slowly, without looking at her—

"If you have no respect for yourself, Sophy, I think you might have some regard for me."

"Yes?" she questioned.

"Is it nothing to you that you hurt me almost beyond endurance? That you wreck my hopes, wreck my faith, wreck my ideals? I have thought so much of you, Sophy, loved you so sincerely. Perhaps I have idealised you——"

"You will know better for the future," she interrupted, with a harsh laugh.

He looked at her with a questioning light in his eyes.

"Women are all alike," she said in the same flippant way, "and are not worth idealising. They can be sweet as honey when they like, but they are cats at heart."

"Oh, Sophy! Sophy!" he protested.

"I'm telling you for your good," she laughed. "If you would have any peace in life, keep free of them. They will stick pins into you and gloat over it. You used to think I was an angel, didn't you? You know better now, and you ought to be very grateful to me for refusing to marry you."

They had reached by this time the end of Higson's Avenue. The night was falling rapidly, and the lamp-lighter was busy lighting the street lamps. Sophy stopped suddenly and held out her hand to her companion.

"You need not come any farther," she said in a gentler tone of voice.

"As you will," he answered quietly.

" And don't worry about me. I'm not worth it. No girl is worth fretting over."

" You seem to have a poor opinion of women."

" I know them, that's the reason. Good-bye."

" You mean good-bye ? " he questioned.

" Yes."

He held her hand for a moment, then turned and walked away without another word.

## CHAPTER X

### THE LAWYER'S WOOING

**D**R. WILKS paid a visit to Lancashire and Cheshire extending over several days, and had returned to Tottenham feeling quite prepared for an encounter with Mr. David Smart. He might not be able to prove his points, but he had presumptive evidence of a good deal, and he determined to make the best, not only of what he knew, but of what he suspected.

He was still anxious to avoid precipitancy, if possible; but his circumstances would brook no further delay. Not only was his stock of ready cash all but exhausted, but he was more deeply in debt than he had been for several years past. Hence it was essential that he should put the screw on the most likely person and at the earliest possible opportunity.

When Dr. Wilks next journeyed to Longhampton, Mr. David Smart was caught a little off his guard. If he had had the faintest suspicion of what was coming, he might have prepared himself.

He was sitting a little disconsolately in his office, with his heels on the fender. A cheerful fire was crackling in the grate. It was a pleasant office on the whole, and comfortably furnished. A thick Turkey carpet lay on the floor. The writing-tables were of walnut; the chairs were upholstered in

claret-coloured leather ; the coal-scuttle was of fumed oak. Against the wall opposite the fireplace was an iron rack supporting a considerable array of black japanned deed-boxes, and on the table was an assortment of papers of various sizes, tied neatly with red tape.

In spite of the papers and the deed-boxes, however, there was no evidence of excessive activity or strain. In fact, the papers were so neatly arranged, and were so dusty round the edges, that they might have lain in precisely the same position for a generation.

Mr. Smart looked at the fire steadily, and a frown darkened his brow. He was, on the whole, a good-looking man, with a clean-shaven face and a healthy complexion. Except that his hair was growing a little thin above the temples, he gave no indication of being as old as he really was. From a little distance he looked not a day more than thirty-five. His mouth and chin were well-shaped, and indicated considerable firmness and strength of character. His nose was large, and his eyes rather wide apart.

Either Mr. Smart was not busy, or he was not in the humour for work. As a matter of fact, both counts were true. For the moment, business was unusually slack, and he was trying to think out some means by which he could bring up his income to his requirements. What he had been hoping and expecting for years was still a good way from realisation. Indeed, he was not at all sure that his dream was not receding farther and farther into the distance. Mary Maxwell had become so absorbed in her benevolent schemes that she seemed less disposed than ever to talk of matters that led in the direction of love and romance.

This was a sore disappointment to Mr. David Smart, for it was idle to deny that of late—to say nothing

of any earlier desire—he had been casting covetous eyes on the heiress. This was not to be wondered at in the least. Mary had grown into a very beautiful girl—beautiful in character as well as in face. Then, also, only Mr. Smart knew the amount of her possessions, and he was by no means so other worldly as to despise the good things of this.

It would not be fair, however, to say that her wealth was her only attraction in Mr. Smart's eyes. He believed that it would be quite possible to love her, and to love her very sincerely, if she hadn't a penny. Being, however, both good-looking and rich, he decided to fall in love with her at quite an early date. His love, perhaps, was not of the most passionate order; but that, after all, was only natural. Her beauty did not flash upon him suddenly. He had seen her grow up from childhood—had watched the gradual unfolding of the flower—so that there was no charm of novelty to inflame his passion. Familiarity had, more or less, dulled his eyes to her exceeding beauty.

Neither could it be claimed that Mr. Smart was of the romantic order. He was, first of all, a business man, with a keen eye to the things of this world. In the second place, he was an intensely religious man. Next to squeezing the last penny out of a client, he enjoyed nothing so much as conducting a meeting. As a lover, he came in but an indifferent third. Matrimony for itself did not attract him greatly. As a man of the world he saw clearly that it had manifold drawbacks. It might enlarge his experience, but it would certainly curtail his freedom, and if by any chance it should lessen his temptations, it would, without doubt, increase his expenditure.

But matrimony with a big fortune attached was quite a different thing, and occupying so large a place

as he did in the life of Longhampton, he needed a considerable income in order to maintain his position. Nor was that all. As the moving spirit of a thriving religious community, he saw that bachelorhood had certain disadvantages. He was the head of the Brotherhood of Saints. He stood in the position of vicar, or more correctly, perhaps, of a bishop, and he often received an embarrassing amount of attention from the sisters who would like to share the responsibilities of headship. All this, of course, would be obviated if he were to get married.

He was rather surprised to find that Mary Maxwell, as she grew up, was so little interested in the subject of matrimony. He had got the idea into his head that most girls thought of little else, that it was the one subject of supreme interest, the objective of their most soaring ambition.

He broached the subject in a tentative way several months before Mary came into her property, but his hints were quite lost upon her. He seemed to her to be talking nonsense, and she told him so.

The next time he ventured upon the theme he did so in a more definite manner, spoke of the honourable state of matrimony, of the dignity of wifehood, of the many advantages that came to a woman in having a husband to protect her, with a good deal more to the same effect. Mary listened with an amused light in her eyes, and wondered what gossip he had heard.

When he gave her a chance of reply, she said naively—

“I don't know in the least who has been talking about me, but I can assure you your responsibility is not going to come to an end just yet.”

“You misunderstand me, Mary,” he said hurriedly.



"Nobody has been talking about you that I am aware of. And as for responsibility, my desire is that it shall increase."

"Oh, I thought by the way you talked that you wanted me to get married."

"Oh no, not at all—that is—I mean, that there is no young man—that is, no man of your own years—that—that seems to me in any degree worthy of you."

"Oh, really, Mr. Smart," she said, with a merry laugh, "I did not know before that you were given to flattery."

"Is it flattery?" he questioned seriously, "or is it disparagement of the young men? I confess I am seriously disappointed in the young men of to-day. They are so given over to sport of every kind that they appear to have no room left in their minds for serious thought."

"I quite agree with you," she answered, with a gay laugh, "but really, to adopt a newspaper phrase, are we not wasting our time in discussing a subject that is not within the region of practical politics?"

"Not entirely so, I hope, Mary—not entirely so. You see, within a few weeks from now—if nothing unforeseen transpires—you will come into possession of a very considerable fortune."

"Perhaps the real heir will turn up," she said. "I sincerely hope he will, for I can assure you I don't want to be burdened with old Robert Digby's money."

"I can quite understand the feeling," he answered slowly and with unction. "To have the responsibility of so large a fortune must be a great burden. Hence the advantage of having a wise and judicious husband to take the responsibility from your shoulders and keep the sharks away from you."

"But really, Mr. Smart, I don't want a husband,"

she said, trying hard not to laugh in his face. "And if I did, where is this wise and judicious creature to be found?"

"Ah, there is the difficulty, I admit. It is hardly reasonable to expect wisdom in a young man of three or four-and-twenty, is it?"

"I don't know why it should'nt be," she answered.

"Well, you see," he went on, "wisdom comes from experience, and experience is generally the result of years. What experience has the average young man? I repeat it—he has none. He is not to blame for that. I had no experience when I was in my early twenties, though I think I was old for my years."

"Most people think they know more than their fathers," she said, with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

"Mature manhood may rightly claim to know more than youth, surely?" he questioned seriously.

"I don't think youth will concede the claim, nevertheless."

"I know that quite well," he answered. "That is the pity of it. Knowledge is often pushed aside by conceit and inexperience."

"Am I so conceited?" she queried.

"No, no. You misunderstand me again, Mary. You are wise beyond your years. But when it becomes known that you have a fortune, you will have suitors galore, tuft-hunters, speculators, idlers, and thieves."

"Oh, how sad!" and she laughed outright.

"It's really not a laughing matter. You are young, pretty, inexperienced—perhaps impressionable, and—and——"

"Well?" she questioned, seeing he hesitated.

"I wish I were ten years younger," he said mournfully.

"Why, what has that to do with it?" she asked, arching her eyebrows.

"Don't you see?" he said, twisting his hands together as if in pain, and looking beseechingly into her face.

"I'm afraid I don't," she replied, with a wondering look in her eyes.

"Ah me!"—and he sighed. "It would be my joy, Mary, to watch over you, to protect you—to—to—love you. But—but—I'm afraid I'm too old."

She stared at him for a moment, altogether too astonished to speak.

"Please don't be angry," he said, breaking the silence. "I ought not to have spoken, but my feelings carried me away. It is the tragedy of life to love too late, but I will not speak again. I will be your counsellor, your friend, your legal adviser. You may always rely on me in any crisis in your life."

"I am sorry you have spoken to me as you have done," she said, all the light of mirth gone out of her eyes. "It will make so much difference in our intercourse——"

"No, no, Mary, you must not allow it," he pleaded. "You must forget that I love you, forget that I have ever spoken. Look upon me as an old man, and unworthy of happiness so great."

"But you are not old, and you are not unworthy. Oh, I am so sorry to give you pain! You have been so true a friend to mother and to me——"

"And I would continue your friend. Command me at any time, and I will do your bidding. You must try to forget this afternoon. I am your old lawyer, nothing more."

Mr. Smart refused to stay to tea that afternoon.

He had urgent business, he said, and was compelled to be in Longhampton before the office closed.

On the whole he was quite satisfied with his afternoon's work. He was astute enough to know that Mary would not be able to forget that afternoon, however much she tried. He had dropped seeds which would grow in spite of everything. A girl can rarely be indifferent to a man who has honestly and sincerely made love to her, particularly if it be the first confession of love that has reached her ears.

That David Smart was absolutely sincere, Mary had not the shadow of a doubt. That he was a good man she was quite convinced. That he was deeply in love with her appeared to be beyond question, and that he was not unreasonably old was a fact that would hardly be disputed.

Indeed, Mr. Smart was in his prime. He had grown through the conceited period into sober manhood. He was a man to whom almost any woman might look up with pride and confidence.

As the weeks and months passed away Mary found herself wondering whether it would be possible to love David Smart sufficiently to marry him. He was in her thoughts constantly. She enumerated to herself his many excellent qualities, thought of his long friendship, his disinterested service, his unswerving loyalty.

If her head alone had to decide the question, David would have realised in a comparatively short time his heart's desire. But Mary was conscious of something lacking. Respect, sympathy, admiration, were all there, but something more was needed, though what that something was she hardly knew.

"I am sorry to give him pain," she said to herself, "for he's a good friend, and I do respect him and like him very much, but I would rather remain as I am."

David was naturally disappointed that Mary gave him no encouragement to reopen the subject. He knew that she had thought a good deal about him. She was not the kind of girl to brush lightly aside a matter of so much importance and forget it. Moreover, the look in her eyes, the sudden restraint that sometimes came over her, the unconscious blush that occasionally mounted to her cheeks convinced him that his quest was not hopeless yet. But he saw also that the time had not yet come when he could with safety declare his love a second time—that is, in the terms of ordinary speech.

Nevertheless he could look his love. He could put pleading into his eyes—at least, he thought he could—he could utter a volume of longing in a single sigh, he could throw a melancholy tone into his voice. This he did constantly.

He saw Mary at least once a week, sometimes more frequently. He spent hours in her company, discussing details of this benevolent enterprise and that. He sometimes inwardly groaned when she persisted in giving away such huge slices of her income. He thought to how much better use he could put the money.

Mary was greatly touched by his generosity, by his devotion. He gave so much of his time to her affairs, and was so genuinely interested in her schemes. What would she do without him? To whom could she turn if he were out of the way?

So the months slipped away, and about the time Dr. Wilks visited Winterholme, Mr. Smart made

another attempt to broach the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

It was over the result of that attempt that he was brooding as he sat with his heels on the fender staring into the fire.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

IT seemed to Mr. Smart that his patience was rewarded when discussing with Mary the advisability of enlarging Winterholme and providing scholarships for the daughters of needy but deserving people.

"It is a noble thing to do, Mary," he said in his most impressive manner. "A very noble thing to do, but——"

Then he hesitated and cast on her a look of mingled pity and devotion.

"But what, Mr. Smart?" she questioned brightly.

"Do you not think, Mary, you are overburdening yourself?" he asked plaintively.

"Oh no!" she answered. "Not in the least."

He shook his head dubiously.

"You are carrying already as much as any one individual ought to carry," he answered in a tone of grave concern. "If you add this to it, the strain will become insupportable, and what will happen then?"

"Oh, Mr. Smart," she answered, with a winning smile, "you are unnecessarily anxious about me. It is good of you to take so much interest in my affairs——"

"And in you!" he interjected.

"Yes, and in me. But really I am in perfect health, and am not in the least overworking myself."

"It is the additional burden I am thinking of," he said. "If only your father were alive, or you had a brother, or—or—were happily married."

"But do you think women are incapable of seeing through such matters?"

"I do not say incapable," he said uneasily. "But women were not intended for the rough-and-tumble of the world. Suppose you enlarge Winterholme. You will have a lot of workmen about the place—masons, carpenters, plumbers, contractors, mechanics, engineers. Plans will have to be studied, prices analysed, materials examined, and work inspected. Think of all this in addition to what you have already. Is it a burden that a young girl can safely carry?"

"Oh, but I have mother," she answered, "and she is quite enthusiastic about the matter. And then"—with a frank and beaming smile—"you know I have you."

"I wish you had me in reality," he said gallantly. "I wish I had the right to take all these burdens from your shoulders."

She blushed violently, and then grew deadly pale. She knew she had brought the confession on herself, and she saw no easy way out of it.

"But won't you be able to give a kind of general oversight over things?" she questioned at length.

"Well, Mary, I hardly know," he said desperately.

She looked up at him with a light in her eyes the like of which he had never seen before, and his heart leaped suddenly. He fancied it was the sign for which he had been looking. Yet David Smart was nothing if not diplomatic. The reiteration of his love might not be the best card to play. He was not sure that it would appeal to her even yet. The romantic side of her nature had not been touched.



The woman in her had not been awakened. She was so absorbed in works of philanthropy that she had no time to dream of love, and he was vaguely conscious of the fact that he was not the kind of man to fire her girlish imagination.

So, instead of pleading his love as any genuine lover would, he practised once more the art of diplomacy.

"For Heaven's sake don't misunderstand me, Mary!" he said in a tone of great concern. "There is nothing I would not do for you, no task I would not undertake; but I have to consider you as well as myself."

"I do not quite understand," she said, raising questioning eyes to his.

"I hate to have to mention it," he said, turning away his eyes from her, "but I dare not, for your sake, come here more frequently than I have been in the habit of doing. People are talking quite freely enough already."

It was a master stroke, and he brought his eyes quickly back that he might see its effect.

She almost staggered as under a blow. She saw in a moment the full meaning of his words.

"I did not know that people had been talking," she said at length, with an effort, all the colour leaving her face.

"It is the nature of people, I suppose," he said in a tone of pained regret. "Also, I fear they have seen what you have failed to discover."

"What is that, Mr. Smart?"

"How greatly I love you!"

She did not reply to him for several moments. Her brain seemed to be in a whirl. The very room seemed to be turning topsy-turvy.

"I have been very thoughtless," she stammered at length. "Such a thing never occurred to me."

"For my own part I am prepared to defy all the gossips," he said, with a slight wave of the hand. "To serve you has always been a pleasure, and always will be."

During the rest of the day Mary reflected a good deal. She had reached what might be termed a marriageable age. Most of her girl friends were either married or engaged, and unless she intended to remain a spinster it was perhaps time she turned her thoughts in the same direction.

There could be no doubt, also, that with her increasing responsibilities she needed constantly a man's help and judgment. It was no doubt quite true what Mr. Smart had said, that women were not intended for the rough-and-tumble of the world. Hence a husband whom she loved and trusted, and who was in perfect sympathy with her aims, would be an infinite help and comfort.

But where could she find such an one? She had been pestered with would-be suitors from the moment she came into possession of Bob Digby's money. Most of them were young, some of them exceedingly good-looking, but she was quite certain there was not one of them who was in sympathy with her work. Very few people were. One of her mother's most intimate friends told her one day that she was looked upon in the neighbourhood as an amiable lunatic.

If she had spent the money on herself and on her rich neighbours; if she had given expensive dinners and entertainments to those who were never hungry, and did not need entertaining; if she had done the grand lady at fashionable spas, and gambled away

her gold at bridge or roulette, she would have been applauded right and left, and all the smart people in the neighbourhood would have been at her beck and call. But because she took a higher view of the responsibilities of wealth, and allowed conscience to rule her conduct, she was quickly dropped by the fashionable people. Responsibility is a word hated by the selfish rich, and conscientiousness is regarded as a species of insanity.

Mary did not mind, however. She never hankered after the silly excitements that the idle rich called pleasure. She had her own reward, and an abundant reward it was.

But whenever she turned her eyes in the direction of matrimony, she could not help feeling that she was faced by a very real danger. Who was she to trust? Who, among her many would-be suitors, cared for her for herself alone? Of all the men she knew, David Smart appeared to be the only one who was really and truly in sympathy with her aims.

Moreover, David had become necessary to her. She did not see how she could get on without him, his experience was so wide, his judgment so sure. She had accepted his help as the most natural thing in the world. He seemed part and parcel of Robert Digby's property. She went to him as confidently as she would have done to her own father had he been alive.

Now people were beginning to talk, were coupling their names, were saying she knew not what. When she came to think the matter over calmly, she could not be greatly surprised at it. Mr. Smart was a constant visitor at Winterholme. He had shown her in public every possible attention, and he was by no means, too old to be looked upon as a possible suitor.

She debated the question almost day and night for the best part of a week, but always stuck at the same point. She had nothing against Mr. Smart, and to accept his offer would be to smooth away many difficulties. It would put an end to the attentions of undesirable young men ; it would still the wagging tongues of gossip. It would secure the constant presence of a safe and trusted counsellor. It would, to a certain extent, round and complete her own life. What reason, therefore, had she for keeping him any longer in suspense ?

She had only one reason. She was not quite sure she loved him sufficiently to accept him as a husband. As a friend, he was everything that could be desired ; even as a lover she would be able to find no fault with him. But to marry him ! That was quite another matter.

She wondered if she was unreasonably fastidious. She could have understood her hesitancy if there was someone else she preferred. But as she cast her eye over the circle of her male friends, she had to own that she liked David Smart best of all.

There was another aspect of the question that was strongly in David's favour. He was in sympathy with her philanthropic schemes, and if she lost his help and counsel, others might have to suffer even more than herself. Hence, in the interests of the good work she was trying to accomplish, ought she not to grasp with thankfulness the strong hand that was reached out to her ? The more she debated the question, the more emphatically reason and logic pronounced in David's favour.

On his next visit, David plucked up his courage and boldly proposed to Mary. She could not profess to be surprised or taken unawares, nor did she blame

him in the least for wishing to bring the matter to an issue. The suspense was doubtless as unsettling to him as it was to her, perhaps more so, since he seemed to be quite sure of his love.

Mary listened to his proposal with quiet dignity, and Mr. Smart told his story without passion. Indeed, he dwelt more on the help he would be able to give her than on the love he bore for her.

"Of course, Mr. Smart," she said in reply, "I cannot pretend that this is sudden or unexpected, nor am I insensible of the honour you have done me. But I would like a few days longer before coming to a final decision."

"Is that really necessary, Mary?" he questioned eagerly. "You have known me all your life."

"It is quite necessary," she said quietly. "A matter affecting the whole future of our lives should not be settled in a moment."

"As you will, Mary," he replied, with a smile that was intended to be pathetic. "As I have waited so long, I will try to be patient a little longer."

The days, however, seemed very long to Mr. Smart. So much was hanging in the balance, that he dreaded any unexpected turn in fortune's wheel. As one day succeeded another, and Mary gave no sign, he began to feel a little despondent at times.

He was in one of his least cheerful moods when Dr. Wilks called.

"Show him in," he said to the boy, after he had examined Dr. Wilks's card for some moments in silence.

Dr. Wilks walked into the room in his best professional manner, bowed to the lawyer, then laid his hat on the table, and threw his gloves into his hat.





MR. SMART SCRUTINISED HIS GUEST SHARPLY, AND DECIDED IN A  
MOMENT THAT HE DID NOT LIKE HIM.

Mr. Smart scrutinised his guest sharply, and decided in a moment that he did not like him.

"I hope you are not busy this afternoon," Dr. Wilks said suavely, "for the particular matter about which I have called may possibly detain you some little time."

"You wish to consult me professionally, I presume?"

"In a sense yes, and in a sense no;" and Dr. Wilks cleared his throat and looked mysterious.

"Will you be seated?" the lawyer said, and pointed to a chair.

Dr. Wilks dropped into it without a word. He tried to appear quite at his ease, but he never felt more nervous in his life. One glance at David Smart's grey, uneasy eyes, and at his firm, determined mouth, convinced him that he had no weakling to deal with. He had satisfied himself as to the lawyer's general character before he came, but he was not quite prepared for the alert personality that stood before him.

"The matter about which I have called," Dr. Wilks began—and he cleared his throat a second time—"has reference more or less to the will of the late Robert Digby."

Mr. Smart lowered his eyelids slightly, but not a muscle of his face moved.

Dr. Wilks watched him narrowly, and felt disappointed that his first shot appeared to take no effect. That decided him to change his tactics somewhat. His first idea was to approach the subject gradually. He now resolved to blurt out the truth at once.

Mr. Smart waited quietly, and apparently without concern, for him to continue.

"Possibly you will be surprised to learn," Dr. Wilks went on, "that the real heir, the son of Harry Digby, is still alive?"



This shot took effect. Mr. Smart was not prepared for it, and he started violently.

"Who—who says he is alive?" he snapped, making a desperate effort to keep his voice steady.

"I say he is alive," Dr. Wilks said quietly.

"You have seen him?"

"I have."

"And after more than twenty years you recognised him?"

"I attended him professionally, and recognised the marks."

"Indeed;" and Mr. Smart moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. The world, for the moment, seemed to be slipping from under his feet, but he was not the man to betray fear, whatever he might feel.

"You will remember the descriptions printed and circulated after the child's disappearance?" Dr. Wilks questioned.

"Well?"

"Those marks are of such an unique character that it is unthinkable that two people in the world can answer to the description."

"Nature is constantly repeating herself," Mr. Smart answered casually.

"Not so. It is probable that since the world began no two people have been exactly alike. Besides, in the case referred to there is other evidence."

"Indeed! Then I presume the young man intends to try to prove his claim?"

"At present he hasn't the remotest idea who he is."

"Ah!" and Mr. Smart lowered his eyelids still further.

"And all things considered," Dr. Wilks went on, "it may not be the greatest kindness to let him know."

Mr. Smart's half-closed eyes seemed to emit tiny sparks. He began to have an inkling of the true inwardness of Dr. Wilks's visit.

"Why may it not be a kindness to let him know?" he asked quietly, after a pause.

"I understand that the income from old Digby's fortune is being wisely and benevolently used at the present time. It seems a pity to put a sudden stop to any useful work."

"If this young man were able to prove his claim, he might carry it on."

Dr. Wilks smiled, and regarded the lawyer with a look of bewilderment in his eyes. Either Mr. Smart was not greatly troubled or he was playing his part with consummate skill.

"Then you have no objection to his trying to prove his claim?" Dr. Wilks questioned.

"Why should I have?"

"I thought you were interested in the present possessor of the property."

"Who told you so?"

"It is a matter of common talk, if not of common knowledge."

"Well, what then?"

"Just the difference between fingering a large fortune and marrying a penniless bride."

Mr. Smart faced round suddenly, and his eyes flashed fire.

"Will you kindly tell me," he said slowly, and with suppressed passion, "what you are driving at? What is the particular object you have in view?"

"Well, yes," Dr. Wilks said mildly, after a pause. "In a sense we are in the same boat, and the sooner we understand each other the better."

Mr. Smart went to the door and looked out, then he closed it, and locked it. Then returned to his seat by the fire.

"Now, Dr. Wilks," he said, "will you kindly proceed?"

## CHAPTER XII

### A GAME OF BLUFF

FOR a moment or two the two men looked at each other in silence. David Smart waited for his visitor to speak. Dr. Wilks was at a loss for a suitable form of words. He was anxious to appear in the best possible light. He had no great respect for the lawyer ; he knew that before their interview ended the lawyer would have no respect for him. Nevertheless, he was anxious to justify himself if possible, to prove that he was no common blackmailer, but an ordinary, selfish business man who, having a commodity to sell, was anxious to sell it to the highest bidder.

He was very much afraid that David Smart would not be induced to look at the matter in that light. Still, in justice to himself he was bound so to represent the case. He was sensitive still—not on questions of morals, but on points of social etiquette. He had no objection to being a rogue, so long as he was not found out, and if he were found out he would still try to prove that he was no common or vulgar thief, but a respectable and artistic individual who had unwittingly annexed his neighbour's goods.

"I am anxious to be quite frank and explicit," Dr. Wilks said at length, speaking bravely, but feeling very nervous. "Quite explicit, I repeat, and—and quite honest." •

Mr. Smart inclined his head slightly and waited.

"In transactions, or—or—well, in an interview of this kind, one is apt to appear, shall I say, in a—well, in a somewhat unpleasant light?"

"Please go on."

"I do not profess to be any better—any better, I say—or—or, for that matter, any worse than the average man of the world. And when the opportunity presents itself of bettering my worldly position, I naturally seize it as any other man would."

"Well?"

"Well, Mr. Smart, as I have already informed you, I have come—quite accidentally—into possession of a secret, a secret that must be of considerable value to one or two people at any rate. I hold the secret, and I am willing to preserve it in the interests of these people. But if they profit by my keeping the secret, it is only fair that I shall be suitably rewarded for holding my tongue."

"And who do you presume are the people who will profit by this secret being kept?"

"Well, in the first place, of course, the young lady who is at present in possession of the late Robert Digby's property."

"Then why do you not go to this young lady and lay your proposal before her?"

"Is it not better to approach people sometimes through their legal adviser?"

"In a case of this sort, certainly not, I should say. A young and unsuspecting woman is much easier prey."

"I am not a vulture, sir"—Dr. Wilks expanded his chest proudly—"nor a common blackmailer. I hope, at any rate, that I am an English gentleman."

"No doubt—no doubt. Your profession will, of course, be proud of you."

"As proud of me, sir, as—— But we will not bandy words. Why should we?"

"Yes, why should we? You wish me to approach Miss Maxwell in your interests?"

"Not at all. I understand that Miss Maxwell would be quite relieved if the real heir turned up. Hence, the secret is of no value in her eyes."

"Which must be a great grief to you."

"I don't deny that it is a disappointment. Ordinarily, a person in such a position would make it worth one's while to preserve such a secret as I possess."

"And you might threaten to divulge it nearly every day of the week until neither life nor fortune would be worth possessing."

"You do me an injustice, sir. As a man of honour, I should agree to certain terms and should honourably abide by them."

"Oh, no doubt. Let me say candidly that you look that sort of man."

"Sir!"

"Please don't affect any surprise. You promised to be candid with me. I will be equally candid with you. I would not——" Then he stopped suddenly.

"Please go on," Dr. Wilks said, with a deprecating smile.

"Let me know first why you have come to me."

"With pleasure. It is a matter of common knowledge that you are keen on Miss Maxwell's property, if she is indifferent about the matter herself."

"So you would like to blackmail me, would you?"

"Blackmail is a word I do not like, and which by no means expresses my attitude. The question is, is my secret worth purchasing? If so, and you pur-

chase it at a price, you get value for money. That is not blackmailing, but a simple business transaction."

"And how often should I have to purchase it—at the same price or at a larger?"

"You not only wrong me by such a question, sir, but you insult me."

"I am sorry. But what guarantee should I have that you would not threaten me again directly you were hard up?"

"I should give you my word of honour."

Mr. Smart laughed quite loudly.

"Why do you laugh?" said Dr. Wilks angrily.

"Why do I laugh? Surely you must be aware, Dr. Wilks, that a man of education, as I presume you to be, who descends to practices of this kind has no honour left?"

"Then you would not trust me?"

"Not with a sixpence."

Dr. Wilks rose from his chair and began to button his frock-coat.

"Then there is nothing left for me," he said, with a tragic air, "but to inform the young man in question of his true position."

"Which will do him no good, nor you either."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because any person who disappears and is not seen or heard of again is, after a certain number of years, legally dead."

"Is that so?"

"If you were a lawyer you would know it was so. There must be a statute of limitations. Harry Digby's son, in the eye of the law, has been dead these last fifteen years."

"But the fact that he is actually alive must surely outweigh any legal fiction about his being dead?"

"A lot you know about law and its workings," said David Smart pompously. And he smiled with supreme unconcern.

Dr. Wilks began to look uneasy, which the lawyer was quick to notice and to act upon. Mr. Smart was a past-master in the art of bluffing, and he saw an opportunity now of using his art to some purpose.

He was unquestionably very much perturbed over the news he had heard, though he had succeeded admirably in hiding his feelings. Dr. Wilks might be a scoundrel, but he could not conceive of his coming to him unless there was some foundation for his story. If it should happen that his story was true, there would be, to say the least of it, complications of a very disagreeable character—complications that no one suspected or could suspect. Hence his best cure would be to bluff this Dr. Wilks into the belief that he could not possibly gain anything by informing the supposed heir of his discovery, but that it might be an advantage in an indirect way to keep friends with those who were now in possession of the Digby property.

"At any rate," said Dr. Wilks, determined to play his last card, "whether I gain anything or don't gain anything, I shall tell the young man who he is. Moreover, I shall put him on the track of those who spirited him away from England, and then deserted him in an American city."

"Ah!" said Mr. Smart, drawing in his breath quickly, and a startled look swept like a flash across his face.

"It was a rather daring enterprise," Dr. Wilks went on, looking straight into the eyes of the lawyer, "and up to the present the game has been played with success. But there is time yet for a slip betwixt the cup and the lip."



"Your story grows more and more interesting," said the lawyer, smiling innocently. "Won't you sit down again?"

"I don't think so. If there's nothing to be got by keeping a secret, I'll see what I can get by telling it."

"This young man has money, I presume?" Mr. Smart questioned.

"I believe he has," said Dr. Wilks, making an attempt at bluff.

"Ah! That will be all the better for us," said Mr. Smart, with a smile.

"Why so?"

"Because the more money he has the longer he will be able to fight the case, and, of course, the better it will be for the lawyers."

Dr. Wilks looked rather nonplussed. He felt that this smooth-faced lawyer was more than a match for him.

"But—but," he stammered at length, "the present owner of the property does not want it, as I understand the case. Consequently she will not be likely to resist the claim of the real heir."

"My dear sir," said Mr. Smart pompously, "Miss Maxwell may be a philanthropic enthusiast, but I can assure you she's no fool. Do you think she will yield up this large property, with its infinite opportunities for usefulness, to the first adventurer who claims it?"

"If she were convinced of the genuineness of his claim?"

"That, of course, is a very large 'if.' Moreover, I am Miss Maxwell's legal adviser, and I can assure you the claim would be resisted to the full extent of our resources. And in a case of this kind, as you must

know, the long purse always wins. As a lawyer who would take service for Miss Maxwell, you will see that a good lawsuit would be a great advantage to me. Still, though I might gain, I say honestly I do not wish it."

Dr. Wilks looked blank. Either David Smart was one of the most innocent and disinterested of men, or he was the most consummate actor alive. It would never do, however, to show the white feather, or to own himself beaten. So he plucked up courage, and answered back in a tone of defiance—

"Like most lawyers, you talk well, but a court of law will soon prove the value of your words. I tell you this young man will be able to prove his claim up to the hilt."

"Very good, let him try," said the lawyer, bluffing again. "The first lawyer he goes to will tell him that he is legally dead, that the statute of limitations rules him out of court."

"Then, sir, the law is an iniquity," said Dr. Wilks, in a tone of moral indignation.

"That may be true," David answered, smiling benevolently. "I fear in some cases it is true. Still, it is not for us lawyers to speak ill of the bridge that carries us across the stream."

"It will not carry you across this stream anyhow!" Dr. Wilks answered bitingly.

"You think not? Ah, well, you see you are not a lawyer. If you were, you would know that the profitable side in an affair of this kind is the side where the money is."

"That is on Miss Maxwell's side?"

"She has the money, at any rate, and I am her legal adviser."

"But you say the secret is of no value to either of you."

"In a sense that is quite true. I mean by that that it has no money value. Miss Maxwell, as you know, is quite indifferent. For myself, a good lawsuit would provide me with some fat pickings. But now, to be quite frank with you, as the prospective husband of Miss Maxwell——"

"Yes?" Dr. Wilks interjected with an alert and eager look.

"Well, as you know," Mr. Smart said, smiling benevolently, "all bridegrooms are impatient. A lawsuit just now would be inconvenient. It might delay the marriage for a few weeks."

"Most likely it would."

"Whether to prevent gossip and delay is worth paying for or no is a matter for consideration. Also, whether it will be better for you in the long run to be on our side or on the side of this nameless young man may be worth a thought on your part. I say nothing about that just now."

"I don't quite see what you are driving at," said Dr. Wilks, looking distinctly puzzled.

"Then I will be a little more explicit," Mr. Smart said in his blandest manner. "You are not the only man whose fancied Aladdin's Cave has turned out to be a mare's nest——"

"Thank you; that remains to be proved!"

Mr. Smart smiled pityingly.

"Well, at any rate, your secret is of no value to Miss Maxwell," he said.

"I am ready to admit that."

"And I think I have shown you that it is of no value to me."

"And yet you want me to keep it."

"On second thoughts I am not so sure. If you can get this young man to bring his case into a court of law, I can see some very good pickings."

"And the indefinite postponement of your marriage."

"There would be a few weeks' delay, no doubt. And to be quite candid with you, on that ground alone I should like you to keep your tongue still."

"And you are willing to pay me for doing it?"

"It is a sordid way of looking at the matter, Dr. Wilks."

"I can't help that," was the quick reply. "Besides, I don't see where the sordidness comes in. If a man makes a discovery in mechanics, or chemistry, or medicine, he naturally makes the most he can out of it, and nobody calls him sordid. I have made a discovery, and, I own up, I want to profit by it."

"Well, how much do you want?"

Dr. Wilks named a sum which made the lawyer laugh outright.

"You must be a born humorist, Dr. Wilks," he said; "but come and see me again to-morrow. You may possibly be of great service to us in the future."

"Service to you?"

"I say possibly. You are a medical man. In schemes such as Miss Maxwell is organising, there are many departments. Our long talk has discovered to me qualities in you that I did not suspect at the beginning."

"It is the present I am concerned about," Dr. Wilks said feebly. "While the grass is growing, the horse is starving."

"Ah, well, we can obviate that, and to-morrow we can discuss the wider question."

Dr. Wilks's heart warmed when he felt a couple of crisp notes in his hand. He had visions of a sumptuous dinner at the best hotel in the town, and dreams of a fixed and sufficient income in the near future.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE LAWYER SCORES

“ I SHALL have to get the fool under my thumb somehow,” was David Smart’s reflection when the door closed behind his visitor. “ I am sorry he caught me so completely unawares. I’m afraid I made a false move at one or two points. Still, on the whole, I think I managed him pretty well. Fortunately, he is less cunning than he thinks, and has much more brag than ability. Still, he is dangerous, and must be attached somehow. In the first place, he must be brought to believe that his interests lie in keeping friends with me ; and in the second place, his power to levy blackmail must be destroyed. Let me think now, for by the time he calls to-morrow I must have my scheme complete in all its details.”

Dr. Wilks made his way to the Star and Garter in a state of mind somewhat difficult to describe. He was both depressed and elated. Depressed that what he regarded as his frontal attack had so completely failed, and yet distinctly elated that an unpremeditated and largely unconscious flank movement had brought him within sight of victory.

He meditated deeply after he had comforted himself with a good dinner, and, on the whole, his meditations took an optimistic turn. He lived over again the events of the afternoon, and chuckled. In a game of

wits he had scored by his skill, he had plucked success out of apparent failure.

That David Smart was a very clever man he was quite willing to concede, but such a concession made his own skill appear all the greater. He had discovered the lawyer's weak place, and had forced him at the same time to a recognition of his (Wilks's) genius.

Such a triumph was something to be proud of. He had forced this hard-headed lawyer to see that he was not the man to be dismissed with a wave of the hand. Nay, more—that he might be of considerable service perhaps in developing and consolidating the late Robert Digby's estate, perhaps in preventing the present owner from wasting it in foolish schemes of alleged benevolence; that part of the scheme was necessarily vague as yet, but, in any case, he felt sure that David Smart did not want to get rid of him.

There was, of course, a disappointing side to all this. John Lostun would have to be thrown over, and Sophy's dream of marrying a millionaire would come to a sudden and ignominious end. This would be rather hard on Sophy. She had wooed Lostun so patiently and with such unfailing tact that it would be nothing less than cruel that she should be disappointed in the end. Still, when she saw how matters stood she would not hesitate a single moment in giving Lostun the slip.

Dr. Wilks considered this part of the question with great care. He admitted that he had been foolish in imagining that John Lostun could prove his claim in five minutes, that he had only to submit to the most casual examination and the thing was settled.

David Smart had certainly got the better of him on that point. He had tried to bluff the lawyer, he knew, but he saw clearly enough now that questions

of identity were not so easily settled, especially after a lapse of more than twenty years, and that when it came to a lawsuit it was always the long purse that won.

"I wish I had seen that point before," he said to himself reflectively, as he watched a cloud of smoke circling upward from his cigar. "It was a mistake to set Sophy on that tack. Lostun will never get the money, or, if he does, it will be only after years and years of litigation, and then there will be no estate left. The lawyers will have eaten it all up. No; Lostun is of no use except as a sword of Damocles to hang over the head of David Smart. He wants the girl, which means he wants her money, which means he wants help in preventing her from squandering it, which means—— Ah, well, I am beginning to see where I come in."

Dr. Wilks spent the greater part of a week in Longhampton, and during the last three days he was the guest of Mr. Smart. The lawyer apologised handsomely to Dr. Wilks for the hard and hasty things he said on the occasion of their first interview, and the doctor accepted the apology in the most gracious manner.

They got on remarkably well together. Dr. Wilks was surprised to discover how many things they had in common, and the lawyer learned in how many ways the doctor could be of use to him. During the evenings they spent together Dr. Wilks did most of the talking. David Smart drank no wine at dinner. Dr. Wilks could not resist the temptation of such a stimulating beverage. Consequently, when they pulled up their chairs before the fire for their coffee and cigars, Dr. Wilks was in the humour to confide in his new-found friend all the secrets of his past life.

David Smart was as adroit in asking questions as



he was in giving answers, and when he talked it was with a delightful vagueness born of long practice in the rostrum before his fellow-saints. His voice was mellow and pleasant, and he talked with an easy flow which seemed to carry all opposition before it, and which left the minds of his hearers at the end in a condition of dream-like tranquillity.

It was not until their last evening together that David let himself go. Dr. Wilks listened entranced, and when he rose to go to bed he told the lawyer that he felt a better man. Such noble sentiments, couched in such 'sublime language, he had never listened to before.

On his journey back to Tottenham, Dr. Wilks was vividly conscious of two things. First, that it would be to his advantage to keep on friendly terms with David Smart, and, secondly, that it would be a dangerous thing to oppose him. He was not entirely happy. Morning often brings reflection. With a steadily widening distance between him and the lawyer he began to see, with growing clearness, that he had in some way or other let his independence slip; that he had weakly and unwittingly played into the lawyer's hands; that he had talked with too much freedom, and signed too many documents. He was not quite certain where he was. The only thing that seemed clear to him was that he and David Smart were linked together in a kind of partnership, the object of which was to keep Miss Maxwell in undisturbed possession of her property.

He called at Shoreditch on his way home, so that it was considerably after nightfall before he reached Rose Villa.

He found Sophy in a restless and petulant mood.

"Well?" she questioned sharply. "Have you accomplished anything?"

"I have, my Sophy," he said, beaming upon her benevolently. "I have, indeed. My purse is better replenished than it has been for a long time past."

"Oh, that's all right," she answered in a rather more cheerful tone of voice. "And how long will it take you to exhaust the mine?"

"Oh, a very long time, Sophy. In fact, I see the way to some excellent results."

"Well, you'd better rake in all the shekels you can without unnecessary delay," she answered, "for I intend shutting up the game as quickly as possible."

"Shutting up the game, Sophy?" he questioned, raising his eyebrows.

"Closing it down, if you like the term better."

"I don't quite see what you mean," he answered.

"No? Then I'll put the matter into plain English. I've brought John Lostun up to the sticking-point at last."

"You have?" he questioned, with a little gasp.

"I have," she answered flippantly; "but I can tell you it took a deal of doing. But as it had to be done, I thought I had better go ahead with the business while you were out of the way."

"Yes?"

"I loathe myself horribly, mind you; but I'll get over that. When I get my hands into the gold jar I'll forget everything. But won't I make the money fly, and won't I have a good time?"

"But how did you manage it, Sophy?" he asked feebly.

He had an uneasy feeling that things were a bit topsy-turvy. He had no idea that Sophy would attempt to bring John Lostun to book so soon, and

he had intended to point out to her at the earliest opportunity that it would be useless pursuing that quarry any farther. Now, by her precipitancy she had thrown the whole situation into confusion.

"Oh, I managed it easy enough," she said, with a laugh. "Of course, I was very sweet to him, and I put on my Sunday togs, and I looked my very best, and I waited upon him hand and foot."

"Yes."

"Then I told him that the neighbours were beginning to ask when we were going to get married, at which he looked just a wee bit surprised. Then I enlarged on our English notions of propriety, and so on, pointed out the difficulty of a girl's position, and hinted pretty plainly that if we were to cool off now there would be trouble. Well, he rose to the bait beautifully, admitted that he liked me better than any other girl of his acquaintance, and that sooner than I should suffer a moment's pain, or that a single unkind word should be said about me, he would have the engagement announced right off."

"And you agreed?"

"Of course I did. Did you imagine, when I had been angling in the stream for months, that I should let the fish slip when I had got it fairly hooked?"

"Well, it would be scarcely like you, Sophy."

"I should think not, indeed! And yet I feel meaner and meaner every day. If he weren't so awfully honourable and upright I should feel heaps more comfortable. Oh, he's as innocent as an Aylesbury duck! You know, he doesn't pretend to be in love with me."

"No?"

"Not he! He's too honest for that! He owns he likes me, says I'm pretty, and that we shall be very

happy together, and all that. I wonder he doesn't see through me."

"He'll see through you soon enough," Dr. Wilks answered, with an uneasy laugh.

"Very likely, for I shan't pretend to keep up the farce after we are married. But what do you think of the engagement-ring? Isn't it a beauty!"

And she slipped a diamond hoop from her finger and passed it on to her father.

He examined it for several moments in silence. He felt more perturbed than he knew. What to do for the best was a puzzle.

"It's lovely," he said at length, with an absent look in his eyes. "It must have cost him twenty pounds."

"I daresay. I'm awfully proud of it. You see, I never had a real diamond ring before. All the girls think it is just splendid."

"What? Has your engagement been published?"

"Why, of course it has! Do you think I was going to light a candle and put it under a bushel, whatever that may mean? No, no! When I had got him up to the sticking-point I made up my mind that I would have the thing made so tight that he would have no chance of slipping out of it, however anxious he might be to do so."

Dr. Wilks drew a long breath and looked distressed.

"You don't look nearly so elated about it as I expected you would be," she said crossly. "I thought you would dance round the room with delight."

"It's taken me a bit by surprise," he said uneasily.

"Well, you ought to be all the more joyful in consequence. Why don't you call me a clever girl?"

"You are a clever girl, Sophy—a very clever girl.

But, you see, when it comes to the point of losing you it makes me just a bit sad."

"Oh, nonsense and fiddlesticks!" she answered flippantly. "I never knew anybody yet who wasn't glad to get off his girls. They are an awful drug in the market to-day. I think there ought to be a law passed to compel every man to marry as many——"

"Now, Sophy, you are getting inconsequential again," he interrupted.

"I'm not a bit. Think of the thousands of girls in Tottenham. Do you ever think what's to become of them all? There are not men enough to go half-way round."

"So much the better, perhaps. Marriage isn't everything."

"It's the only respectable calling that most women have to look forward to, at any rate!"

And with a toss of the head she went off into the kitchen to get supper ready.

Dr. Wilks slept less soundly that night than he had done for several nights past. He had got himself into a hole, and he did not know how to get out of it. It would be the courageous thing, he knew, to tell Sophy exactly how matters stood, but he was not courageous, and he was almost more painfully conscious of it than ever before in his life. He had gone over into the enemy's camp, as it were, and he was ashamed to let out the truth.

Before morning he had come to the conclusion that it would be the easiest way out of the difficulty to let things remain as they were. The policy of drift required no effort and no forethought. In the chances of life no one could tell what would happen. He had been planning for months, and in every important particular his plans had gone entirely wrong. If he began advis-

ing Sophy again he might get her into worse trouble. Besides, there was no denying Lostun was a very estimable fellow. Apart altogether from the Digby property, he did not think Sophy was likely to get a better chance. A young man with three hundred pounds a-year and clever at his work might go far. No; he would let things go on as they were, and having come to that conclusion he settled himself a little more comfortably to sleep.

## CHAPTER XIV

### UNAWARES

JOHN LOSTUN accepted the situation with equanimity. He had not intended getting engaged to Sophy—for a time, at any rate.

Indeed, he had never thought very seriously about the matter at all. He liked her very much. She was always bright, and it was a relief sometimes to be in her company. When the weather was bad, and he felt depressed and out of sorts, the idea of having a house of his own and a wife to look after it and him took possession of his fancy, but usually he was so absorbed in his work that he had not much time to give either to thoughts of love or matrimony.

Now that the matter was definitely settled, he resolved to make the best of it. He saw no reason why he and Sophy should not be very happy together. He was earning enough to keep her in comfort, and with care and economy they might be able to lay aside a little every year.

Had he his time to live over again, he thought it probable he would act a little differently. He had not considered that in visiting at Rose Villa so frequently he was placing Sophy in a position from which she could not easily extricate herself. If their engagement had been hurried, it was his own fault. The neighbours had begun to talk. 'Sophy' was at the

mercy of garrulous, perhaps spiteful tongues. As an honourable man he was bound to screen her, even if he sacrificed something himself.

That he had sacrificed something he knew, though he made as little of it as possible. Like other young men, he had cherished an ideal, and it was not without a pang that he gave it up. Sophy was not without her excellent qualities. She was no doubt very bright, very vivacious, very pretty. But she was not what he had pictured when he had given rein to his fancy. He had seen a woman who was gentle, gracious, strong, bright, but not inconsequential; mirthful, but not shallow; quick-witted, but not flippant; beautiful, but not vain—a woman whose radiant face was the index of a great and radiant soul; a woman who would be strong in adversity, patient in trouble, hopeful amid disaster; a woman whose presence would be an inspiration, and whose smile would bring courage to the despairing soul.

That such an ideal he might never realise in the flesh he was well aware. That there were such women in the world he fully believed. They might be few and far between, for Nature is niggardly of her choicest things, but that such women existed he had no doubt. And possibly some of them were won by men who did not know how to appreciate them.

He sighed a little when he woke next morning to the recollection of what he had done. No man can see his ideals go by the board without a pang. To many young men it is the first big disappointment of life, and it flings its shadow forward to the end of the journey. As the years advance they accept the inevitable with philosophic calm, and find consolation in work, or, it may be, in politics, or in what the world calls pleasure.



John Lostun was disposed to be philosophic from the first. He argued that not one man in a million ever finds his ideal—that not one man in a million was worthy of an ideal woman ; that marriage at best was a compromise, and that life of necessity was a system of give-and-take. He was not an ideal man himself ; he was anything but a hero in his own eyes. He could not imagine himself being a hero in the eyes of any woman. Hence it was unreasonable to demand or expect in a woman what he himself did not possess.

In this charitable frame of mind he made his way toward Tottenham in the evening, with a diamond ring in his pocket. He felt a little elated when he put it on her finger and took her on his knee and kissed her. She was his now, and he was thrilled for a few moments with a sense of possession. But the feeling of ecstasy did not last long. The thin vein of sentiment was soon exhausted.

John Lostun left earlier than usual that evening. He had to take a journey into the country next day, and would have to be up betimes. He was conscious all the way home of a sense of loss. Instead of feeling that something had come into his life, he felt that something had gone out of it. He seemed to have reached the end of all things. He knew the best now that life had to give, and he was oppressed by a sense of keen disappointment. Was this all ? Had romance no fairer flower, no sweeter fruit ? Where was the ecstasy that poets and novelists had led him to expect—the thrills that woke all earth to music ?

He knew when he put the ring on her finger that no love such as the poets and romancists wrote about had touched him or her. Perhaps no such thing existed. Perhaps his day-dreams were but the efforts

of a diseased imagination. Life was prose, not poetry ; fact, not romance.

He expected that his experience was like that of most other men. Pleasure, they say, is in the chase, not in the possession.

He felt, on the whole, fairly cheerful when he started on his journey the next day. The weather was fine, the air keen and frosty, and as the train got away beyond the straggling suburbs into the open country, and the sun climbed higher into a perfectly clear sky, he felt that it was a joy to be alive. Existence itself was something to be thankful for.

It still wanted an hour to noon when he alighted at Daveley Station, and made his way toward Winterholme, which one of the porters pointed out to him perched high on the slope of a hill. There were very few leaves on the trees now, so that the house came well into view.

He had come to estimate for electric plant to light the school, and to provide power for the laundry, service lifts, and ventilation. The new wing was already in process of erection, and Mary Maxwell had just recently decided that while the workmen were about, and the place was in a condition of upset, they might as well make the place as complete as possible by the introduction of electric light.

This would have to be generated on the spot, as electricity had not yet found its way to Daveley. To generate electricity meant the erection of suitable plant, and that meant the employment of some good firm of electrical engineers. After making a number of inquiries, Mary wrote to Cleveland, Glover & Co., of London Wall, and John Lostun was sent down to take stock of the place, advise what was best to be done, and give an estimate for the carrying out of the work.

John knew nothing of Mary Maxwell, and cared less. He presumed that she was an unromantic spinster of mellow age, who, having come into possession of a good deal of money late in life, was anxious to make the most of her opportunity and gratify her benevolent instincts while she had the chance.

That anyone who was young in years would give up her life to philanthropic enterprises did not occur to him. He naturally associated youth with pleasure. Girls, as a rule, were far more concerned about frocks than about benefiting their fellows; and for himself, he was not disposed to blame any young woman for desiring to have a good time.

John swung his way along the hard road with a look of cheerful optimism on his face. It was pleasant to be in the country, pleasant to feel the sunshine, and after the stuffy City the air felt sweet and clean.

He was a little sorry that he had to interview a woman in the first instance. Engineering seemed altogether out of their province. He expected this Miss Maxwell would know nothing about the matter, and would, perhaps, pretend to know a great deal. However, he was not going to worry beforehand. His business was to get, if possible, the contract for his firm, and to that end he would have to make himself agreeable all round, and listen to everything that might be said to him.

Mary Maxwell, from an upstairs window, saw him walking towards the house with an easy, graceful swing, and guessed in a moment that he was the representative of Cleveland, Glover & Co. As he drew nearer to the house, she could not help studying his face—not a common or everyday face by any means. There was character in it, a face that would attract

attention almost anywhere, and once seen would be remembered.

She raised her hand to her forehead as if in thought. Had she ever seen this man before? There was something about his face that struck her with a sense of familiarity. The impression was only for a moment, however, yet it was revived again when she came at length into his presence.

John Lostun was shown into the same room that Dr. Wilks waited in a good many weeks previously. He even sat in the same chair that Dr. Wilks occupied, but he felt none of the nervousness of that individual. John Lostun was quite at his ease, and as he had the day before him he was not at all impatient. After his walk from the station through the keen frosty air he was glad to rest and feel the glow of the fire.

Mary kept him waiting much longer than was necessary. There was no reason in the world why she should go to the trouble of changing her gown, or why she should wait before the glass to rearrange her hair. Her visitor was only a working engineer, and her interview with him was to be of a purely business character. But then, no one can say why a woman does any number of things. Perhaps she does not know herself. She follows an impulse or an instinct, and does not worry herself about reasons.

Mary Maxwell was not a vain woman. She did not live merely to dress—she had no desire to make conquests; her time and thoughts were occupied with serious subjects. Nevertheless, she was a woman with every natural instinct unimpaired. If she had been going to interview the dustman, she would have taken a peep into the mirror first. She would have dressed becomingly if she had lived alone and never saw a soul from January to Christmas. A slatternly

woman must of necessity suffer from some grave moral defect.

John Lostun was standing before the window, looking out upon the landscape, when she entered. He turned suddenly when the door creaked, and for a moment his self-possession left him completely. Here was the face he had seen so often in his dreams—the face he had searched for in the streets of London, until he had given up the hope of ever seeing it again, the face that had seemed to him the most beautiful he had ever looked upon.

He drew his hand across his eyes as if to clear his vision and assure himself that he was not suffering from some hallucination; then, with a sudden effort, he pulled himself together and tried to speak. But Mary forestalled him.

“ You represent the firm of Cleveland, Glover & Co. ? ” she questioned in a soft, musical voice.

“ That is so,” he said, with a slight American accent. “ I have been sent down by my people to see just what you require—that is, presuming, as I do, that you are Miss Maxwell ? ”

“ Yes, I am Miss Maxwell,” she said, with a smile and slightly heightened colour. “ Won’t you sit down and I will tell you exactly what I want, or, at any rate, what I think I want ? ”

John seated himself with as little apparent unconcern as possible, but in reality he hardly knew what he did or where he was. The sudden reappearance of the face around which he had woven so many fancies seemed to change the hard, matter-of-fact world into a kind of fairyland.

He did not want to talk about gas-engines and dynamos and accumulators, and such-like material things. For the moment he felt himself in a world

of romance, and such things were entirely out of place. They were not wanted. They would be as incongruous as a kitchen mangle in a lady's boudoir.

He would have been content to sit and look at the beautiful woman who seated herself opposite him. Her loveliness was greater than his memory had pictured it. Her complexion had caught a richer hue since that day he sat opposite her in a London omnibus. Her smile was like the opening of the gates of paradise.

She began to talk in a free, easy fashion, but for a while he heard nothing of what she said. He heard her voice, soft, musical, and seemingly far away, and he gave himself up to the delight of pleasant sounds. Then, in a moment, the spell was broken by the entrance of Mrs. Maxwell.

Half an hour later, Lostun and Mary went out of doors together. He wanted to decide where the little generating station should be placed, and how it could be made to fit in with the work now in progress.

She left him after a while, so that he might take measurements and consult with the contractor and architect of the new wing, who both happened to be present.

Mary found her mother standing in the open door with a puzzled expression in her eyes.

"Do you know, Mary," she said, "that young man reminds me of Harry Digby more than anyone I ever saw."

"Was Harry Digby so good-looking?" she asked innocently.

"Oh yes, he was an uncommonly handsome fellow, and very clever at his trade. You don't remember him?"

"I don't think I ever saw him; but I have a feeling that I have met this Mr. Lostun before."

"That is hardly likely, I think. He talks like an American."

"I believe he is an American. Didn't Mr. Smart say that Cleveland, Glover & Co. were an American firm?"

"Of course he did. I thought I couldn't be mistaken in the accent. Anyhow, he's a very gentlemanly young fellow."

"Don't you think, mother, we ought to ask him to stay to lunch?" Mary questioned after a short pause, a soft blush overspreading her face.

"I really don't see that we are under any obligation to do so, Mary."

"No; not under any obligation, of course. But he has come all the way from London, and you know there is no place in Daveley where one can get a decent meal."

"Very likely he has brought some provisions with him."

"And would you let him sit out in the cold and eat them?"

Mrs. Maxwell looked thoughtful. She had said a moment before that Lostun was a gentleman, and so it was impossible to suggest that he should go into the kitchen. On the other hand, to ask an entire stranger to sit down with them at their table was scarcely in harmony with her strict notions of propriety. She did not like to send him all the way back to London hungry, for that would savour of inhospitality.

"Perhaps you had better find out if he has made any arrangements for getting lunch," Mrs. Maxwell said at length. "He may not have known, of course; what sort of a place he was coming to."

"Very likely he thought Daveley was a town,"

Mary answered brightly. "Anyhow, we can soon ascertain."

And she tripped away toward the rear of the building.

John Lostun was slowly and thoughtfully replacing the indiarubber strap of his notebook when Mary appeared on the scene. He looked up with a start, and his grave face brightened. She seemed to him an embodiment of all physical excellences at any rate. Her figure was as perfect as her face, her manner as winsome as her smile, and her carriage as graceful as her voice was musical.

"Have you nearly finished?" she questioned brightly.

"For the present," he answered; and he smiled at her, scarcely knowing why.

"Mother and I have been wondering," she said a little hesitatingly, "whether you would mind staying with us for lunch—that is, of course, if you have not made any other arrangements."

"I have made no arrangements at all," he answered frankly. "I really had not thought about the matter. Usually there is some hotel——"

"But as it happens there is no hotel in Daveley," she interrupted. "There are one or two small beer-houses, I believe. You see, we are quite out of the world here."

"Not quite," he said, laughing. "In fact I almost envy you being able to live in such a delightful place."

"It is a bit dull in the winter," she said. "But you should see it in the summer time. It is just glorious then."

"It is glorious now," he said, looking away across the landscape. "It reminds me a little—though only a little—of the place in which I grew up."



“ Was that in England ? ”

“ Oh no. It was out in the Far West. I have only been a short time in your country.”

“ And do you like it ? ”

“ Very much. It was a little bit strange at first. But now for some reason it grows more home-like every day.”

“ I am glad you like it,” she said, with a tinge of colour in her cheeks ; “ but now, about lunch. You’ll stay with us, of course ? ”

“ I shall be delighted,” he answered, “ if you think I won’t be in the way.”

“ I don’t think you will,” she said, pretending to look serious. And she led the way into the house.

## CHAPTER XV

### CONTRASTS

JOHN LOSTUN was never quite certain what he had for lunch that day, and yet the time he sat at the table seemed to him the supreme hour of his life. Conversation flowed quite freely, consequently the meal was stretched out to an inordinate length.

He could never clearly recall what was said or what topics were discussed; he could only remember that the talk flowed on without restraint—talk that was revealing, stimulating, inspiring. No empty tittle-tattle filled up the time, no feeble and flaccid criticisms of men and things. There were flashes of wit, quaint turns of humour, and now and then a clear-cut epigram that was like a spear of light in a dark place.

Mary and her mother were both cultured women. They had read widely and with insight, but there was no parade of learning, no affectation of bookishness, no attempt to appear clever. In a sense the conversation was ordinary enough. John Lostun knew little or nothing about the philosophies of the world, and was too absorbed in his work to keep himself abreast of the thought of his time. Yet, in his own way, he was a thinker and a philosopher. He went through the world with his eyes open, he reflected seriously

on the problems of life, and he was always prepared with a reason for the faith that was in him.

Conversation between such people can never be dull or insipid. The quality of the mind reveals itself unconsciously, the character peeps out at a hundred points. "Thy speech bewrayeth thee" is a truth of wide significance.

Every now and then Lostun looked across the table and feasted his eyes on Mary's beauty. What wonderful eyes she had! How her face became transfigured when she smiled! How sweet the curve of her lips—a perfect Cupid's bow. How exquisitely chiselled were her throat and chin.

But it was not the face alone that fascinated him. He was conscious of something more. It was as though he caught glimpses of the soul behind. Her clear brown eyes were not only the windows through which she looked, but through which he looked also. He saw not only the face, he saw the woman who answered to all that was highest and best in his nature.

Once only the thought of Sophy crossed his mind, and it was as though someone had emptied a tumbler of cold water down his back. He almost gasped for a moment. Then he lifted his eyes again to the woman opposite him, and he was in an enchanted land once more.

They lingered over their coffee an unconscionable time—so long, indeed, that Mrs. Maxwell had to excuse herself and run away. Mary appeared as unconscious as John Lostun of the flight of time. She led him on to talk about America, about its manners, its customs, its modes of life, its politics, its general outlook.

Mary's questions were always to the point. They were not questions that revealed ignorance; on the

contrary, they revealed considerable knowledge, and a genuine appreciation of the subjects touched upon.

John talked only about what he knew, what he had seen and experienced, and he talked well in the main, giving every now and then quaint American "turns" to his speech, which tickled Mary immensely.

They forgot that they had met for the first time that day, or, to be strictly correct, that they had never spoken to each other until that day. John did not remind her of the journey they had in a 'bus together. She would not be likely to remember it, but it was constantly in his thoughts. It seemed almost like a page out of a book that they should meet again, and that he should find that her mind and character were all that her face would lead him to expect.

He made no attempt to analyse his feelings—indulged in no dreams of the future. He just gave himself up to the enjoyment of the moment. He had found what he had been seeking almost ever since he came to England, but what that might mean to him in the future he did not stop to inquire.

When he rose to take his departure, Mary discovered that she had several fresh questions to ask relative to the proposed electric plant. So she threw a scarf round her shoulders and walked down the drive with him. It did not seem to her in the least strange that she should do so. He had come on business; he was the accredited representative of a well-known firm; he was a gentleman, he had proved himself to be exceedingly well informed. They discovered that they had a good deal in common. What more natural, therefore, than that they should continue their conversation down the drive?

At the lodge gates they parted in the most formal way, she walking slowly and meditatively back to

the house, he hurrying rapidly forward to catch his train.

On his way back to town his thoughts persistently reverted to the events of the day. He felt serious, almost solemn. Life on the whole seemed a stupid and senseless tangle. The sequence of things was entirely wrong. Most people seemed to be born either too late or too soon. The rule of contrary appeared to be the prevailing order. The things people wanted were nearly always beyond their reach, while the things they didn't want were thrust upon them willy-nilly.

It was beautiful, no doubt, to have dreams of an ideal woman. It was more beautiful still to find that ideal in actual flesh and blood. But then what was the use of it if your ideal was placed for ever beyond your reach?

John Lostun had found what he had been looking for—not an angel, but a woman. Her face had haunted him for months. It answered completely to his conception of beauty. It might not be so beautiful in the eyes of anyone else, but in his eyes there was nothing more to be desired. He had looked at her a hundred times that day, and his first impression was confirmed in every particular. But what was still more satisfying, her character answered to her face. His intuition was sufficiently keen to know that. She had revealed herself unconsciously in her conversation. Her soul had looked through her eyes. Moreover, her daily life bore testimony to the greatness of her character. In a gay and frivolous world, and in an empty and selfish age, she stood out conspicuous by her rarity.

He could not help feeling solemn, almost angry at the maliciousness of fate. He had found the woman

his heart had hungered for, only to discover that she was not for him. Two insuperable obstacles stood in the way. In the first place, she was an heiress. It was reported that her yearly income was far more than she had yet been able to spend, though her charity had been a surprise to everybody. And, in the second place, he was engaged to another.

He shrugged his shoulders involuntarily when that thought passed through his mind. The contrast between Sophy and Mary Maxwell was almost too painful to be contemplated.

A little later, however, he reflected that it was perhaps a good thing he had become engaged to Sophy Wilks. It would in some measure put him out of the way of temptation. Were he free he might yield to the witchery of Mary Maxwell's presence. Now he would be on his guard. He could never woo Mary Maxwell, even though he were free and in love with her. Nobody should ever have the right to say that he was a fortune-hunter.

Lostun did not go out to Tottenham that night—he did not feel in the mood; he wrote a brief note to Sophy instead, telling her that he had been out of town all day, and was very busy, but that he hoped to get out on the following evening.

"She won't mind," he said to himself. "She is not so passionately in love with me that she cannot be happy out of my sight."

His judgment of Sophy was fairly sound in the main. He knew that she was shallow, volatile, wayward, flippant. He had not wanted her to be any other. He liked her because she was the opposite of himself. Where his judgment failed was in relation to her sincerity. He was so transparently honest himself—his reverence for women was so great—that

the idea of Sophy being a hypocrite did not occur to him. That she could deliberately plot and plan to entrap him—that she could simulate an affection she did not feel—was a thought too horrible to be entertained of any woman.

He sat by the fire most of the evening with a book on his knees. He had intended putting in a couple of hours of hard reading, but his thoughts got completely out of his control, the book dissolved before his eyes, and in its place was the face of a woman—the most beautiful he had ever seen.

He tried several times to banish the vision. He had a vague feeling that he ought to do so in justice to himself—in justice also to Sophy. It could not surely be right in strict ethics to be thinking about one woman while he was engaged to another.

On the following evening he journeyed out to Tottenham—but not with that burning impatience that is supposed to characterise the newly-engaged man. It would be very pleasant no doubt to look again into Sophy's laughing eyes, and listen to her inconsequential chatter, but he had to own to himself—perhaps reluctantly—that his heart hungered for something more.

Sophy was waiting for him, smiling and radiant.

"I do believe the little girl is very fond of me," he said to himself when she came and opened the door before he had time to ring.

Sophy was in her most affectionate mood. She was almost gushing. Her father had taken her into Regent Street the previous day, and purchased a ready-made gown for her, and she was brimming over with happiness in consequence. A diamond ring and a new gown in one week seemed almost too good to be true.

"Don't you think I look like a duchess?" she said, twisting herself round before her lover.

"You look like a queen," he answered, smiling gravely.

She put up her mouth to be kissed a second time, and he did his duty manfully.

Dr. Wilks came in a little later. Lostun had not seen him for several weeks, and was struck with the improvement in his appearance. He was better groomed, and better dressed than usual.

"Ah, Lostun," he exclaimed, his face beaming, "I'm delighted to see you. But what a sly dog you are."

"Is that so?" Lostun questioned, with a smile.

"Sly dogs, both of you, I say. I don't know which is the worse—you or Sophy."

"I'll take all the blame," John said, with a laugh.

"Well, that's chivalrous, of course. I told Sophy when I returned the other evening that you might have waited till I came back."

"I expect we were a bit precipitate," John answered soberly, "but Sophy and I talked it over, and we came to the conclusion that it would be the best course to adopt."

"Well, perhaps it was. I'm not going to blame you. I was once young myself. I hope you will be very happy. Sophy is a good girl——"

At this point Sophy ran out of the room.

"She does not like to hear me say so, of course," Dr. Wilks went on. "Would prefer that I said nothing about her, but I'm bound to say she's an estimable daughter, and as such will make an estimable wife. I shall be sorry to lose her;" and Dr. Wilks blew his nose significantly.



"You will not lose her yet," John said in his blunt and honest fashion.

"I am glad to hear you say so, but—but, ah, my dear Lostun, I know what young men are. They all say the same thing and they all act in the same way, but anyhow you have my blessing."

"I felt sure we should have that," John said quietly. "You have been a good friend to me."

"Don't mention it, please, don't mention it. But have a cigar. I expect Sophy is looking after supper."

For a while the two men smoked in silence. Now that they had got beyond the subject of the engagement there seemed nothing left to talk about. John could talk well when there was anyone to draw him out. But Dr. Wilks had not that power. In fact, the two men had little or nothing in common, and to continue a conversation required a considerable amount of effort.

Dr. Wilks appeared to be absorbed in contemplation of the growing length of white ash at the end of his cigar. His face was a picture of ineffable peace. There might not be for him a care in the wide world.

In reality, however, he was feeling decidedly uncomfortable. For the last two days he had been trying to riddle out the problem as to where he stood, but with very indifferent success. He had got his thumb upon David Smart, he knew, but he was painfully conscious that in some way or other Smart had got his thumb upon him.

How the thing had been managed was a complete puzzle to him, and yet the more he thought about the matter the clearer it became to him that he and the lawyer had got into the same boat, and that neither could wreck the boat and drown the other without drowning himself.

In one sense he had the pull over the lawyer, inasmuch as the lawyer had far more at stake than he had—far more to gain and far more to lose. Dr. Wilks was in the happy position of having practically nothing to lose. He had been bankrupt in fortune and in reputation for twenty years. David Smart had discovered that without much difficulty, and had formed his plans accordingly. Albert Wilks was to be held and used only by the prospect of gain being dangled before his eyes. And Albert Wilks was discovering more clearly every hour that his only hope of gain was by keeping friends with David Smart.

He contemplated the end of his cigar with such absorbing interest because he had not the courage to meet John Lostun's clear, honest eyes. He knew he had been chief actor in a conspiracy to keep John Lostun out of his rights. And though his conscience was a shrivelled and attenuated thing, with a voice so feeble that it was only on rare occasions it could make itself heard, he was not without knowledge of what constituted honourable conduct, and he knew well enough that his conduct was not worthy of a gentleman. It was not his conscience that told him this, but his pride.

He was relieved when Sophy came back into the room. Sophy could always keep a conversation going without the least difficulty. She could talk on any subject with equal ease. Her lack of knowledge carried her triumphantly over every stile. Her self-assurance was delightful, and sometimes contagious.

John felt a little bored before the evening was out, and when he returned to his lodgings he was by no means in his most optimistic mood. The contrast between the empty and irresponsible chatter of Sophy and the enlightened conversation of Mary Maxwell

on the previous day was altogether too violent for his peace of mind.

He still hoped that he would be quite happy with Sophy, but he was not so confident as he had been at the first. One thing, however, he was quite certain of—that he would have to banish absolutely and completely Mary Maxwell from his mind and heart.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PASSIONATE LOVER

MARY MAXWELL was perplexed. As it happened, this was the condition at the moment of nearly all the other characters in this story. Mary knew that David Smart was waiting for her answer. She had hinted that it should not be unduly delayed, and she was afraid she had led him to expect that it would be in the affirmative.

He had not been to Winterholme for nearly a week—a most unusual thing for him. Most likely he had stayed away on her account. He was anxious not to give gossips occasion for talk. This was very noble of him, and was deserving of reward.

But however noble it might be, it was inconvenient. She wanted him. There was no one else with whom she could talk business or who could advise her in dealing with estimates. She had trusted in him so long that when he was not near she felt more or less at sea. This was unfortunate. It seemed to interfere with her liberty of action. Circumstances were forcing her to say “Yes.” while her heart said “No.”

As a friend, Mr. Smart was all that she could desire—kind, far-seeing, just. But as a possible husband he seemed for some reason less attractive; and yet she appeared to have reached the point where she would have either to accept him as a husband or lose him as

a friend. It was very annoying. She wished people would mind their own business and not interfere with hers. Why could not a woman have a man friend without her neighbours scenting in a moment either scandal or matrimony ?

The visit of John Lostun, for some reason, seemed only to add to her perplexity. She had not a large circle of male acquaintances, and it seemed to her that the young engineer belonged to an unusual and particularly interesting type. She liked him from the first. He didn't pose, or pretend or pay compliments. He was candid almost to bluntness, ingenious, and perfectly transparent. Their conversation over lunch and after deepened her first impression. A woman's intuition is keen, almost infallible, where men are concerned ; when she is deceived, she is deceived with her eyes open.

She found herself thinking about him at intervals during the rest of the day. She could recall without any difficulty almost every expression of his face. She knew even the colour of his necktie and the pattern of his watch-chain.

Over the tea-table the conversation seemed to turn inevitably in his direction. Mrs. Maxwell had been impressed by his likeness to Harry Digby, and mentioned it again. It had set her vaguely wondering.

"Don't you think he has a good face ?" Mary questioned, and found herself blushing slightly before the words were out of her mouth.

"He has a striking face," Mrs. Maxwell replied. "And, on the whole, a face that one would trust."

"I'm sure he's honest," Mary said impulsively ; -  
"and he knows his business, too."

"Well, I should presume he does," Mrs. Maxwell

replied, with a laugh. "He would not be of much use to his firm if he didn't."

On the following day David Smart put in a tardy appearance, and received a most gracious welcome. Mrs. Maxwell chided him on his long absence, but Mary, who knew, was silent on the subject. David was unusually grave. His encounter with Dr. Wilks had sobered him and made him not a little apprehensive.

For half an hour they talked business, and every now and then he darted appealing glances at Mary. She pretended, however, not to be looking at him, but she felt sure he would want the question settled that day.

When their business talk was nearing the end she excused herself and left the room, and for the next half-hour the lawyer and Mrs. Maxwell talked religion—and, let it be said here, David Smart enjoyed the talk.

He was one of those curiously-constituted individuals who, while caring nothing for the ethical side of Christianity, found genuine pleasure and delight in religious emotion.

When David addressed his brethren at the Temple, and worked himself into an ecstasy, he was not a hypocrite. To most men religion means right conduct—being honest and truthful, and pure in thought and deed. To David it meant nothing of the kind. He preached that morality was filthy rags, and he believed it. Good works were a snare, because people trusted in them. Morality might be a man's greatest curse, and sink his soul into perdition.

It was a very comforting doctrine, especially to people whose morality was nothing to boast of. "Not of works, lest any man should boast" was a favourite

text of David's. His favourite hymn had a refrain to the following effect—

“ Jesus did it all. All to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain—  
He washed it white as snow.”

David never expected to be saved by his good works. He set no value on morality. He was living, as he explained to his fellow-saints, not under the law, but under grace. Religion was not in doing something meritorious, or in trying to keep Commandments that belonged to a dispensation that had been superseded. Religion consisted mainly in accepting with joy and gratitude what had been done by another, and out of this grew worship, adoration, communion.

To David's credit, it should be said, he was never happier than when enjoying the communion of saints, and those who listened to his addresses said he talked sometimes like a man inspired. He forgot time and place, and nearly everything else. His body swayed with the billows of emotion that shook him and swept over him. His face caught an ecstatic look, his voice thrilled with emotion, his eyes burned with an inward fire.

Gifted from his youth with ready utterance and a mellow and flexible voice, responsive in an unusual degree to the emotional side of religion, it is not surprising, perhaps, that he broke loose from the stern guidance of the law and the inflexible bonds of ecclesiasticism, and formed a freer communion of emotionalists who were content to be saved by someone else.

There were people in Longhampton, as we have already seen, who spoke of David Smart as a hypocrite. But the appellation was scarcely true. On the religious side of his nature, as distinguished from the ethical,

he was quite sincere. He believed that religion and business had no necessary connection. They belonged to entirely different departments, and were to be kept separate and distinct. Religion was not to be soiled or confused by being mixed up with business. Neither was business to be hampered or deflected by religion.

Hence, in his office he was a man of the world, with a liberal interpretation of the meaning of the word "world." In the Temple he was a saint—"the world forgetting," if not "by the world forgot."

David's conversation with Mrs. Maxwell on the afternoon in question, if not illuminating, was at least restful, and it had the further effect of impressing her—as it had often done before—with the deep religiousness of his nature.

David had an object. He wanted Mrs. Maxwell to use her influence with Mary on his behalf.

From religion to love was, after all, not a difficult step, and he took it suddenly.

"You are not ignorant, of course, of the nature of my feelings toward your daughter?" he said, without raising his voice or even his eyes.

Mrs. Maxwell gave a little start, and raised her eyes suddenly, but he was looking calmly and unblinkingly into the fire.

"She has alluded to the matter once or twice," she said quietly, after a pause.

"And you favour my suit, I hope?"

"Mary is of age now to choose for herself, and I would not like to interfere in any way."

"She is beset by great temptations. So many fortune-hunters are ever on the prowl—young men of no principle whatever."

"I don't think the question of matrimony troubles



Mary in the least. Her mind is too full of other things."

"Then you won't speak a word in my favour?"

"There really is no necessity that I should, Mr. Smart. Your life and character are as well known to her as to me. If you can win her love, be assured that I shall not stand in the way."

"But a word from you would go so far. I have reason to believe she is halting just now on the brink, and the slightest word might incline her in the right direction."

"But if you believe in an overruling Providence, Mr. Smart——"

"I do—I do!" he interrupted. "But I am just a little afraid that Mary may resist Providence."

"Mary never does anything rashly," Mrs. Maxwell remarked.

"But surely it is not good to halt over long between two opinions. If I were not so absolutely convinced——"

But the sentence was never finished, for just at that moment the door was thrown open and Mary came quietly back into the room, while Mrs. Maxwell rose hastily and took her departure.

Mr. Smart believed in striking while the iron was hot.

"Your mother and I have been talking about you," he said, without any perceptible alteration in the tone of his voice. "I have been asking her to use her influence with you on my behalf."

"You believe in coercion, do you?"

"No, not in coercion, Mary, but in judicious guidance, in gentle persuasion. I am afraid you will try to resist Providence."

It was an unfortunate speech from his point of

view. The assumption that his wish was also the will of God stirred up the latent rebellion in her nature.

"I have prayed a good deal about it," he went on.

"I also have prayed," she interrupted. "But I see no light as yet."

"Are you sure that you have opened your eyes?" he questioned in a tone of deep seriousness.

"Are you sure you have not closed yours?" she asked, while the faintest suggestion of a smile played round the corners of her mouth.

He glanced at her for a moment with a look of pained surprise, then rose slowly to his feet.

"I had hoped to find you in a different humour," he said lugubriously, "but I can wait. But know this, Mary, that no coldness on your part can quench my love for you. I would shield you from temptation, ward off the cruel shafts of evil tongues, counsel you in your difficulties, help to bear some of your heavy burdens——"

She relented in an instant. She could not bear giving pain.

"Oh, Mr. Smart, I am grateful to you," she said impulsively. "I am indeed!"

"But you do not love me?"

"I care for you a great deal—more than for anyone else except mother. I appreciate all that you have done for me——"

"Then what more is needed?" he questioned eagerly.

"I do not know. Perhaps nothing more is needed. Only—only—— Oh, let me wait a little longer!"

"But you say you love no other man more than me."

"I care for no other man as much. But love! How is one to be sure?"

"The certainty will come," he said passionately. "It is not a lightning flash ; it is the rising of the sun. It will dawn upon you as the day dawns when you are my wife."

"How do you know that?" she cried. "How do you know it will not remain always dark? Suppose—suppose—— Oh, but there must be certainty beforehand."

"The certainty is with me, Mary," he replied, with a shake in his voice. "And love will beget love. Mine is the passion that will set your love alight."

"Why has it not set it alight already? Why do I not feel what you feel? How is it you are so certain and I am so doubtful?"

"You do feel it in a measure," he cried. "You admit you like no other as well——"

"Yes, yes! But——"

"That is enough for the present," he persisted. "The fire smoulders for a while, then it gathers strength, then it glows and leaps. Oh, Mary, make me to-day the happiest man on earth."

"No, no! Not to-day! I am bewildered. Yet I want you! I want your help, your sympathy, your counsel, your strength."

"Of course you do," he cried rapturously. "You cannot do without me. I am the complement of yourself, Mary. We are one in aim, one in sympathy, one in devotion to the work to which you have set your hand."

He reached out and caught her hands in his, and held them fast. She tried to pull them away, but he would not let them go. His eyes were aflame, his nostrils quivered. She grew frightened almost, and was conscious that her will was being borne down.

"Let me go now," she said pleadingly. "I want to think."

"I cannot let you go," he urged, drawing her still closer to him. "You are my life, my heaven. Indeed, I want no heaven but you."

"Hush, hush!" she stammered. "Those are not proper words."

"I use the best words that will come," he urged. "No words can tell the greatness of my love for you. It is God-given, Mary. It has been kindled from heaven. You cannot resist it—you dare not! To do so would be to rebel against the will of Heaven."

"You have no right to say that," she pleaded, still feebly trying to draw away her hands. She felt as though she was being subjected to some hypnotic influence. The fire in his eyes burned up her resolution.

"I have every right," he said pleadingly. "Oh, Mary, Mary, do you not see that you hold my life and destiny in your hands? I have loved you for years, watched over you, tried to be your friend, shielded you as far as I could from spiteful tongues and selfish people. Will you fling back my love in my teeth, scorn my friendship, hurl me down into darkness and misery and despair? Leave me after years of waiting and hoping, the saddest, the most broken man on earth?"

His eyes were looking into hers all the time, his passion vibrated in every tone of his voice, his face came steadily nearer hers. She wanted to escape, but could not. She had no strength left. She was being pressed by unseen hands, dominated by a power she had no might to resist.

"You will ruin my life if you say 'No,'" he went on. "I shall not only lose hope, but lose faith. You will see me a derelict—the man who loves you and would give his life for you! Oh, Mary, it cannot be! For your work's sake you must say 'Yes.'"

She was close to him by this, his breath was on her cheek—her very power of articulation had gone.

"It is God's will," he cried—"God's will! Do you hear, little one—my wife?"

And he caught her to his breast and kissed her.

She struggled like a caged bird, and wondered if she was awake or dreaming.

"The blessing of Heaven will be upon us!" he cried in a kind of ecstasy. "The glory of the Unseen will crown our union. Angels will guard our steps. Oh, Mary, Mary, you have made me the happiest man on earth!"

She sprang from him as though she had been shot.

"Made you?" she gasped.

"The happiest man on earth," he repeated; and he smiled benignantly, and moved toward the door.

"But what have I said?" she demanded.

"Don't worry to-day, little one," he said tenderly. "Heaven has witnessed our troth."

She tried to speak, but power of utterance had left her again, and when she looked up he was gone.

With a half-smothered cry she sank into a couch and hid her face in her hands. What had she said? Had she given him the promise he asked for? It was all like some strange dream. She did not know he was capable of so great a passion. The fire of it seemed to scorch her and render her powerless either to think or act.

For the rest of the day she was strangely quiet and absorbed.

She lay awake half the night, wondering if she had really given David Smart the promise he had asked for, and if she had, what then?

She loved no one else. She was bound by many

ties. Her marriage with him might clear any difficulties out of her path.

So, unconsciously, she drifted. A rumour found its way into the newspapers, and was not contradicted. She appeared to accept the inevitable. David did not play the part of the passionate lover again, but he assumed a new authority, he took things for granted, and Mary was so much in need of his help just then that she raised no protest.

## CHAPTER XVII

### DAVID SMART MAKES A SUGGESTION

THE autumn and winter wore slowly to a close. But before the days began perceptibly to lengthen, one or two discoveries had been made. Among the rest David Smart became painfully aware that his position was by no means as secure as he had hoped. He had got Dr. Wilks pretty well under his thumb, but not as completely as he would like. But even if the doctor was as fast as a thief in a mill, there was another factor in the case which, strangely enough, he had quite overlooked until just recently.

How did he know that old Bob Digby's heir might not be discovered by someone else, or by himself for that matter? If Dr. Wilks in the exercise of his profession had fallen across this young man by accident, in the course of the next few months or years other doctors might do the same thing. At the time of his disappearance, the most minute particulars were posted up and circulated in all the newspapers. The birthmark on his left shoulder-blade was so clearly defined that no one could mistake it, while the membrane uniting the first and second toes on each foot was such a phenomenal occurrence that identification could be demonstrated in a moment.

The chances of discovery were so many that David grew cold when he thought of them, and wondered he

had not thought of them before. What would be the gain of marrying Mary Maxwell if, at any moment, Harry Digby's son should turn up alive?

It would be hard indeed if, after years of waiting and scheming, the fruit he had coveted so earnestly should turn to ashes in the mouth. He had lived and wrought for one thing. All the ingenuity he possessed he had exercised towards one end. The hand that had beckoned him from his youth had been the yellow hand of gold, and he had followed with a single eye, and with a devotion that never wavered. He had sacrificed ease and love and domestic felicity in order to secure this prize. He had seen it coming nearer and nearer year by year, till now it was almost within his grasp.

What a strange and malignant fatality it was that just when he was waiting for Mary Maxwell's "Yes," this disreputable Dr. Wilks should come along with his circumstantial story of the finding of the true heir to the Digby estate.

Now and then he wondered if Wilks had lied to him, if the whole story was not a fiction. But in the main he was compelled to believe. Wilks's story was too straightforward to be gainsaid. Moreover, it harmonised so well with what might have happened, and held so well together from beginning to end, that he was bound to admit that the presumption was that the story was true.

Besides this, Wilks had given pretty broad hints as to how the child had been kidnapped in the first instance, and by whose authority.

David Smart rubbed his chin reflectively. He felt that he had more conscience in those days than he had now. He might not have had so much religion, but he had a keener moral sense.

"It was a mistake," he grunted to himself. "Half-



measures are always a mistake. Compromises always work out badly in the long run. The thing has got to be done in the end."

David Smart was of that type of mind that could always find justification for anything he did or anything he proposed to do. He would have made an excellent chief of a Jesuit order. Evil was a thing to be removed, be that thing a habit or an institution or an individual. Good must have a free course in which to run, and if anything blocked that course it must be beaten down and thrust out of the way. Life was not to be considered in the triumph of the right. Individuals must go under when they became a menace to what was good.

The logic of this was simple and conclusive enough. He had been for years at the head of an important religious movement. If he had control of Mary Maxwell's fortune, how wonderfully that movement could be extended. If that fortune fell into the hands of Harry Digby's son, the good work Mary was doing, and the further work which he contemplated, would be practically strangled at their birth. Ought, therefore, any individual to be allowed to stand in the way of an enterprise so benevolent and far-reaching in its effects?

Twenty years before, David Smart would not have allowed such a thought to take possession of him. If it had come he would have put it away. But for twenty years and more he had been diligently engaged in throwing dust in his own eyes as well as in the eyes of other people, and now, when the temptation came to him in its most violent form, his moral sense had become so dulled that instead of seeing its iniquity he began to look for justification.

It is to be questioned if any man falls suddenly

into a great wrong. The way is generally prepared beforehand. There is a gradual loosening of the cords, a gradual sapping of the foundations, a gradual blinding of the eyes to the moral issues.

David's god was gold. He did not know it, for he had never been given to close introspection. He looked no deeper into his own heart than he could help. But he had worshipped the yellow god from his youth, and everything had been made to subserve the one end. His religion had been turned to account like other things. His gifts were bait, his public appearances, advertisements.

He fell in love when he was twenty-five, but because the girl was poor he trampled upon his affections, and then kicked them out of his path. Bob Digby's fortune had been before his eyes ever since that day when, as a young man, he became one of his executors. Since then he had practically lived for nothing else. He had pursued one aim with steady and tireless persistency, until now he was almost within touch of his reward.

Within a few months, if all went well, Mary Maxwell would be his wife. She could not help herself now. She had allowed their engagement to be announced without contradicting it. The cup was close to his lips. Should he allow it to be dashed from him now? Should he give up everything he had plotted for and waited for without a struggle?

To have silenced Albert Wilks was a great thing, but that was not enough. Robert Digby's heir was alive. He was living in London. He might discover himself any day, or somebody might discover him. Such a peril so real—and possibly so near—was intolerable.

Early in the New Year David arranged a meeting

with Dr. Wilks in London. They had lunch together in a West End restaurant, after which they went for a long walk together through quiet and unfrequented streets. The weather was bitterly cold, so that nobody was about who had an excuse for keeping indoors. The two men, muffled almost to their eyes, did not appear to heed the cold. They tramped on and on, always selecting the streets that were most deserted, and as they walked they talked.

At the beginning David did most of the talking. He had a proposal to make, and he was in his most generous and condescending mood. Dr. Wilks was alert and watchful, for he was a little afraid of the lawyer. He had an ever-present fear that in the past David had got the better of him.

"You know, Wilks," David said playfully, "you and I are in the same boat. You can't drown me without drowning yourself, and I can't drown you without going down with you."

"Well," said Dr. Wilks, "what is that apropos of?"

"I will explain in a moment or two," David replied suavely. "You know, of course, that my marriage with Mary Maxwell is definitely settled?"

"Fixed the time, have you?"

"Well, not quite, but that is a detail. But what I wished to say is this, that when I am married I shall have complete control of Robert Digby's fortune. Mary will give the reins entirely into my hands, and will be glad to be relieved of the responsibility."

"And you are expecting a good time?"

"Yes, I am. It will be a great opportunity. It will open up many avenues of usefulness. It will increase my influence in Longhampton, will possibly pave the way to a seat in Parliament. But, unfortunately, there is a fly in the ointment."

"In the person of my humble self?"

"Oh no, Dr. Wilks—not at all. You and I are not enemies. We are rather co-workers. The danger to both of us lies in the existence of Harry Digby's son."

"But he is legally dead."

"That is true."

"And he has no money."

"So you say."

"And he is doomed to failure if he attempts to prove his claim."

"That is no doubt true."

"Then wherein lies the danger?"

"In this. Miss Maxwell has very quixotic notions, as you know. Even to the present she refuses to regard the money as her own. She spends practically none of it on herself, while in her charities she refuses to mortgage the income."

"But when you marry her you will change all that?"

"But suppose, before that time comes, this young man should discover himself, or somebody else should discover him?"

"But he would never be able to prove his claim in a court of law."

"Admitted. But he might prove it to the satisfaction of Mary. She would wash her hands of the whole business. The property most likely would be thrown into Chancery, and then where would you and I be?"

"You would be all right," Dr. Wilks said a little sarcastically.

"How so?"

"When litigation is the order lawyers grow fat. Is not that so?"

"That is so, no doubt. But, you see, I want more."

"The girl?"

"And the gold frame. You see, if the estate is thrown into Chancery I shall get only pickings instead of the whole bird; while you, my friend, will get nothing."

Dr. Wilks winced. He had been living exceedingly well of late, so well, in fact, that the mere thought of going back to the mean economies from which he had escaped was like mustard on a wound.

"Well, what do you propose?" he questioned at length.

"I propose nothing," Mr. Smart answered slowly.

This was a slight deviation from the truth, but since it was in a good cause, it seemed almost a virtue in his eyes.

"But you must have some idea in your head," Wilks protested in a tone of irritation.

"I really came for advice. Two heads, they say, are better than one, and I thought if we talked the matter over together and faced the situation, we might, between us, discover some way out."

"I don't think, to be quite candid, the danger is as great as you imagine," Wilks said reflectively.

"I may be unduly nervous, I own. Nevertheless, the peril is a very real one. You see, descriptive details were so widely circulated at the time. The other executors insisted upon it. There must be thousands of people in the country who have all the facts locked away in their memories. And it only needs—what shall I say?—the touch of circumstances, and there you are."

"But the chances are a million to one against anyone seeing the marks by which he could be identified."

"But the odd chance is disquieting. He might

get a chill to-morrow or an attack of influenza. The doctor would sound him—use the stethoscope—memory would start out on the search.”

“Most likely the doctor would never have heard the story.”

“Why not? You have heard the story. Besides, most things a little outside the normal are recorded in the medical journals.”

“And are read by nobody.”

“I’m afraid, Dr. Wilks, that is not a safe assumption,” the lawyer said gravely. “Besides, old stories are being constantly raked up in a certain class of paper, especially if there is any kind of mystery attaching to them, and they go the rounds of a dozen papers.”

“Well?”

“Well, suppose the story of Digby’s lost heir should be hashed up again, and he should read it?”

“I never thought of that,” Wilks said meditatively.

“I never thought of it myself until a few days ago,” Smart replied. “It would be a great mercy if he could be induced to go back to America.”

“He has no intention of doing that, I believe.”

“You see him pretty frequently?”

Dr. Wilks hesitated for a moment, then replied shortly, “No.”

“But you do not lose sight of him?”

“You may trust me for that;” and Dr. Wilks smiled sardonically.

For a while they walked on in silence. The short winter’s day was drawing rapidly to a close. The keen east wind whistled past them in icy gusts. The lamp-lighters were already hurrying in all directions. Pedestrians kept their heads down, and sought the less exposed side of the street.

David Smart appeared to be thinking furiously.

Wilks glanced at him now and then from the corners of his eyes.

"The truth is," David said at length, "we shall neither of us be quite safe while that young man is on this side——"

"On this side?"

"On this side the Atlantic, or on this side Jordan, whichever you like."

"But as he happens to be here, we shall have to take our chance."

For another few minutes there was silence; then Albert Wilks said, a little crossly—

"We don't seem to be getting any nearer anything with all our talk."

"No; you do not seem to be particularly fruitful in the matter of suggestion."

"Did you think I should be?"

"I hoped you might, of course. But it seems we can only trust to the chapter of accidents. Let us hope he'll get run over and killed."

"In which case you would be rid of him and of your humble servant at the same time. No, my friend. While he lives your interests and mine are identical!"

"I have no wish to part with you," David interrupted hurriedly. "You misunderstand me altogether. You proved to me that he was alive, and you have been rewarded. You would be rewarded tenfold, twentyfold, if you could prove to me that he was dead!"

"Do you suggest that I should kill him?"

"Not for the world; though doctors are licensed to kill, are they not?"

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Only that you keep your eye on him. Life is uncertain. Dangers lie thick about us. Disease hovers in the air we breathe. He might fall—thou—

sands fall every day. But on the day you can take me to him and show me the marks—show me the man—not living, but dead, that day you shall have ten thousand pounds ! ”

Dr. Wilks gasped, and stopped suddenly in his walk. He appeared to shake in all his limbs. After a while he pulled himself together and walked on again, but more slowly than before. His brow was knitted as though he were making a mental calculation. When he spoke again his voice was thick and indistinct.

“ It is not enough ! ” he said.

“ Not enough ? ”

The voice seemed to express profound astonishment.

“ If he were to die, do you think I should tell you ? ”

“ Not for ten thousand pounds down ? ”

“ No ! Such knowledge to you would be worth more.”

“ You are mistaken. But name your lowest figure.”

“ Twenty thousand ; not a penny less ! ”

“ You are unreasonable ! ”

“ On the contrary, I am generous. Twenty thousand pounds at five per cent. is only a thousand a year—a very small price for undisturbed possession of so vast a fortune.”

For a while David Smart did not speak again. They had turned, and were walking eastward once more, with the wind blowing straight in their faces.

“ Very good,” he said at length. “ It is comparatively easy to make a promise when the chances are a million to one against your ever being called upon to redeem it ! ”

“ But if I should ever be able to furnish you with the proof you desire, you pay me twenty thousand down ? ”

“ I pay you twenty thousand down.”

“ I must have that promise in black and white.”



"You shall have it. But, mind you, there must be no foul play."

"Sir!" Dr. Wilks exclaimed, in a tone of indignation. "What do you take me for?"

"I beg your pardon," David said mildly. "I know, of course, you would not get the money out of me by any unfair means."

"Please don't be sarcastic!" Dr. Wilks said, flushing angrily. "You and I are in the same boat, and we had better keep friends."

"That is my supreme desire," David said mildly. "Now I think I will hurry back to Euston. I'd like to catch the four-thirty train if possible."

"You have plenty of time," Dr. Wilks said, and he watched the lawyer walk across the street, and get into a hansom, watched the cab till it was out of sight. Then he turned into a tea-shop. He wanted to rest and think.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### FACING THE ISSUE

D R. WILKS arrived home early that evening, and did his best to be cheerful and entertaining, but with very indifferent success. He was obsessed by one idea, and he was unable to fix his thoughts on anything else. Sophy, who had been alone all day, wanted to talk, and wanted to hear him talk. He struggled bravely, and told a funny story or two which he had seen in *Punch*, but it was clear that his thoughts all the time were somewhere else. There was not only a vacant expression in his eyes, but there were awkward pauses in his speech.

"I do believe, Dad, you are getting dotty," she said at length, in a tone of irritation.

"Getting old, my dear," he said good-humouredly.

"Getting lazy, you mean. I expect you have done nothing to-day."

"There you are mistaken. This afternoon I have had a very important consultation."

"A consultation, eh? That's something new, isn't it? Any money in it?"

"Do you ever think of anything but money, Sophy?"

"Sometimes I think of fine dresses and a big house and a motor-car. But you needn't complain of me. I never saw anyone keener on money than you are."

"What about old Isaac Marks?"

" Oh, well, he's a Jew. Do you know he's been making eyes at me again ? "

" The old rascal ! "

" Don't call him names ! I'm not sure if I hadn't Jack Lostun in tow I wouldn't take him on ! "

" You talk like a fool, Sophy ! "

" Well, I'm not sure I'm not a fool. But if I am, you're to blame. You've taught me to value one thing—money, and kept me poor at the same time."

" I've done my best for you."

" Oh, well, I suppose you have. But old Marks is not a bad sort, and he'll soon be dead. I wish Jack Lostun were as old ! "

" Oh, nonsense ! " he said in a tone of irritation.

" No ; it isn't nonsense either. If only one could have the money without the man ! "

" Why, what is the matter with Lostun now ? Been quarrelling, eh ? "

" No such luck ! We're as proper as two nuns, and as tame as domestic rabbits. Lostun will never quarrel, but he irritates the life out of me."

" Then why don't you give him up ? "

It was a random shot, and he looked up eagerly to see how it would take.

She laughed scornfully.

" Not if I know it," she replied. " I've set my heart on marrying money, and I'm going to do it. By the bye, how much longer are you going to keep him in the dark ? "

" Why ? "

" Because I want the wedding soon. I'm tired of playing the hypocrite just to keep him in tow."

" But if he irritates you now, how will it be when you are married ? "

" He'll soon give up trying to improve me ; he'll discover what I am ! "

"Perhaps he has discovered already."

"I'm sometimes afraid he has. He doesn't come as often as he did, as you know. He sends me books instead."

"Which you don't read."

"Of course I don't! What girl wants to read poetry and biography and all that sort of rubbish? When I want to read I buy the *Herald*."

"You used to read the books Frank Harley lent you," he said at length.

"Oh, well, that was different. I liked Frank Harley—I do still, for that matter—and I wanted to please him."

"Please him—eh?" and he laughed.

"Well, I did in a sense," she answered sharply. "And I shall always feel sorry that Frank is poor and has to keep his mother. I could be happier with him than with anybody."

"He'll be better off without you," he answered cynically.

"No doubt about that;" and she laughed a heartless, mirthless laugh.

For a while neither spoke again. Wilks sat staring into the fire with a far-away expression in his eyes. He felt in a vague, roundabout fashion that he was reaping what he had sown. His daughter was what he had made her, and he was what he had made himself. He had scorned all high and worthy ideals and chosen the path of idleness and self-indulgence. He had brought up his child in an atmosphere of cynicism and selfishness, and had never encouraged her to look at life sanely and seriously. He had been willing to exploit her—to sacrifice her if needs be—for his own selfish ends, and she knew it, and in her turn she had become just as selfish and just as deceitful as he.

Like father, like child. He could not blame her, and yet he could not ward off some pangs of genuine regret.

As Albert Wilks stared into the fire a momentary spasm of contempt seemed to rend him, contempt for himself and contempt for his own daughter ; but it quickly passed. The lust of gold was in his blood.

" You don't seem much in the mood for talk," Sophy said at length.

" I've talked a lot," he snapped. " A man's tongue is not like a woman's—always on the wag."

" But I want to know when you are going to let out to Jack Lostun who he is ? "

" Not yet awhile."

" Not yet awhile ! " and she flashed an angry and searching glance at him.

" Don't be so impatient, Sophy," he said a little more kindly. " You have him safe enough. He isn't the kind of man to cry off."

" That's nothing to the point," she snapped. " Do you think I want to remain in Tottenham all my life ? I'm sick of it. I want to get out into the world a bit. I tell you when I'm Jack Lostun's wife I'm going to make things hum ! "

He did not reply for several minutes ; he stared steadily into the fire, and wondered if he should give her a hint that Lostun's fortune was not so sure as they had expected.

He was being pushed, much against his will, into a very uncomfortable corner. It was easy enough to plot until somebody began to counterplot.

When he made his discovery in Poppleham he imagined that he was going to have everything his own way. The difficulties that had arisen had never crossed the circle of his imagination. He would have been aghast had he foreseen that he would take sides

against Lostun—that he would profit more by his death than by his life.

Sophy watched him with a look of exasperation in her eyes.

“ Look here, Dad,” she said at length, “ you can do what you like, but I intend to have this business settled, and that very soon.”

“ The business settled ? ” he questioned, looking up with a start.

“ The business settled,” she repeated. “ We’ve been engaged over three months now, and he’s heaps cooler than at the start.”

“ Well, let him cool,” he said angrily.

“ Well, if I ever ! ” she said, letting her pretty mouth fall open. “ A little while ago you were egging me on as fast as you could, and now you’ve turned rightabout face. I do believe, as I said before, you’re going dotty ! ”

“ I’m tired,” he snarled, “ and don’t want to be bothered.”

“ Oh, very good ! ” she said, with a toss of the head. “ I’ll go my own way. I’ll get Jack to hurry up with the wedding, and when the day is fixed I’ll tell him his real name.”

“ Don’t be a fool, Sophy,” Dr. Wilks snapped. “ It isn’t as easy as you think.”

“ What isn’t as easy as I think ? ”

“ Getting married.”

She laughed.

“ Oh, you can laugh ; but there are difficulties we never thought of at the beginning.”

“ What difficulties ? ”

“ Connected with the estate. There can be no doubt about his being old Digby’s heir ; but, you see, he’ll have to prove it.”

" Well, he can do that in five minutes, can't he ? "

" I thought so at the beginning, but things are not so simple as they looked. You see, in the eye of the law he's dead."

" Well, what's the law to do with it ? "

" Everything. Being legally dead, the other heir takes legal possession. Possession is nine points of the law. Anyhow, the party in possession has often the whip hand."

" Then do you mean to tell me that you have led me a fool's chase after a will-o'-the-wisp ? "

" Oh no, nothing of the sort ! " he said, turning away his face from her blazing eyes. " I only wanted to point out that you can't rush the thing. You've got to have patience. Meanwhile I'm doing pretty well out of it."

She clenched her hands and stamped on the floor.

" You've been fooling me all along," she said, tears of anger coming into her eyes. " You've just been using me to further your own ends."

" I've done nothing of the sort ! " he protested. " I'm just as anxious about you as about myself. We are both in the same boat. Just have a bit of patience."

" Oh yes, the same old cry ! " she sneered. " I've heard it ever since I was born. But what I want to know is how long will it take him to prove that he's Jack Digby ? "

" I can't answer that question, Sophy. Weeks perhaps—perhaps months. The law is always a bit uncertain."

" Then the sooner he starts on the job the better ; " and she turned and walked out of the room, and a few minutes later he heard her going upstairs to bed.

For a moment or two he stared blankly at the fire ; then he got up and poured out a stiff whisky-and-

water, and drank it almost at a gulp. A few minutes later he helped himself to a second glass, then he sat down again and tried to think.

The path of wrong and intrigue was growing more and more difficult the farther he advanced, and now he stood on the brink of—what ? ”

He had scarcely sufficient courage to face the question, and yet it would have to be faced sooner or later. What did David Smart’s suggestion imply ? Stripped of all cant and verbiage, what did it mean ?

A cold chill ran down his back, and he got up and began to walk about the room.

“ Twenty thousand pounds ! ” something whispered in his ears. “ Twenty thousand pounds ! ”

His eyes sparkled, and his fingers clutched nervously at the lapels of his coat.

“ Of course he meant that ! ” he muttered to himself. “ He said ‘ doctors are licensed to kill,’ so he could have had no other meaning.”

He poured out another glass of whisky, and then continued his walk. He began to feel a little more courageous.

“ What is one life among the millions on the globe ? ” he said to himself. “ Nature sets no value on human life. Out in China last year ten thousand were swept away by a typhoon and nobody was benefited. In this case——”

He paused in his walk, and stared again into the fire.

“ Twenty thousand pounds ! ” he repeated. “ That means ease, luxury, enjoyment——”

He turned round and began his walk afresh. He felt intensely restless.

He had not journeyed so far along the road of life without meeting many temptations. To a good many of them he had yielded. But he had never faced a



temptation like this before. Lying, deceiving, cheating, were venial offences. The only thing of importance was to avoid being found out. But to take a human life——

He felt creepy down the back again. The law was so stupid. To kill anybody except in war was murder. Why should governments have the right to do what individuals were hanged for doing? There really was no sense in it, and as for the wrong—well, if it was right to kill fifty thousand people, it surely could not be very wrong to remove a solitary individual.

He sat down again after a while, and blinked at the fire. What the ordinary individual calls "conscience" did not trouble him. He had lived it down. His first business in life was to do the best he could for himself; his second business was to avoid being found out.

Could he carry out David Smart's suggestion and avoid being found out? That was the problem he had to solve.

He retired to bed at length, and slept soundly. Next morning he felt more in the humour for talk.

"I've been thinking, Sophy," he said, while she was pouring out his tea, "that it would be a mistake to let the secret out to Lostun till you are actually married."

"But Lostun isn't his real name," she answered.

"You don't marry the name," he replied. "You marry the man. If he discovers later that his name is something else, that does not interfere with the legality of the marriage."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am sure. Besides, if you let him know who he is it might give him an excuse for crying off."

"I've thought of that myself."

"Mind you, I don't really think it would, for he's an awfully straightforward sort of a fellow. But it would mean indefinite delay."

"Yes; I've thought of that, too."

"Hence, all things considered, it's much the best that he should be kept in the dark till after the knot is tied."

"But I intend to get the knot tied soon, anyhow," she replied.

"One might think, in spite of your talk, that you were very fond of him," he said, with a laugh.

"I'm not, anyhow. But I am fond of money, and the sooner we're wed the sooner he'll know who he is, and the sooner he'll get his own. Do you see?"

"Exactly. I've no wish to interfere." And he went on with his breakfast.

Later in the day he reflected that it would never do for the engagement between Lostun and Sophy to be broken off. While Lostun came to the house he would be easy game. Besides, no one would ever suspect him of harbouring evil intentions against his prospective son-in-law.

"I'm getting to see my way through the business," he said to himself, with a chuckle, "but I must be cautious—very cautious."

Lostun did not turn up at Rose Villa that evening nor on the evening following. He explained in a note to Sophy that he was not very well.

Dr. Wilks smiled knowingly. Fortune seemed to be favouring him again. He would have no excuse for pressing a bottle of medicine on a healthy man; but a man who was out of sorts would accept it with gratitude.

On the third evening Lostun came as usual, and

certainly he looked anything but well. He made light of his ailment, however, declared it was nothing, and assured Sophy and her father that he felt in the best of health.

"It was only a little shaking I got," he said by way of explanation. "I stumbled in getting out of a 'bus and got a bit of a fright."

"But, my dear fellow, it might have been serious," Dr. Wilks said in anxious tones.

"Oh yes, I know it might have been," Lostun answered, with a laugh; "but as luck would have it, it wasn't. I came within an ace of being run over, and, as I told you, I got a bit of a fright, but no harm was done."

"Are you sure?" Dr. Wilks questioned, with an air of concern. "Let me feel your pulse."

"Oh, my pulse is all right." Lostun laughed, and stretched out his hand.

Dr. Wilks took his wrist between his fingers and thumb, and assumed his most professional air.

"Hem!" he said at length. "Let me look at your tongue."

Lostun obeyed, though inwardly he protested. He disliked being made a fuss of, and feared doctors almost as much as he feared lawyers.

"You want toning up," was Dr. Wilks's verdict. "I'll make up a bottle of medicine for you when you come again."

"Thanks!" Lostun replied briefly; and soon after Wilks went out, leaving the young people alone together.

Two evenings later Lostun returned home with a bottle of medicine in his top-coat pocket.

## CHAPTER XIX

### DEVELOPMENTS

LOSTUN told Sophy and her father the truth, but he did not tell them all the truth. When he stumbled in getting out of the 'bus he fell with his head against the kerbstone, and was picked up unconscious and carried to the nearest hospital. It was thought at first that he had been run over, and a careful examination was made by the doctors in charge.

In an hour or two, however, Lostun felt almost himself again, and insisted on getting up and returning home. The nurse tried to persuade him to remain till morning, but he would not hear of it.

With the unreasoning perversity of a strong and healthy man he felt annoyed at finding himself in a hospital at all.

His head swam terribly while he was getting on his clothes, but he made light of it, and he stubbornly refused to talk about himself. He left a contribution to the hospital fund to pay for any trouble he had caused, got into a growler, and drove away.

There was annoyance on the face of the senior surgeon next morning when he discovered that the patient had gone, and that he had left behind neither name nor address. The case had been reported to him by those who had made the examination,

and he felt curious to verify certain facts for himself.

He had no time to worry over the matter, however. Nature was always playing pranks, and the coincidences in real life were often far more remarkable than those that appeared in fiction.

Lostun stayed away from business on the following day. In fact, he remained in bed till the afternoon, but he gradually recovered as the day wore on, and by the following morning he felt almost himself again, though he looked pale and had dark shadows under his eyes.

Mary Maxwell noticed that he did not look quite well when he paid his next visit to Winterholme, but he assured her, with a laugh, that nothing ailed him. They had become very good friends during the last few months, and Mary anticipated, with a pang of regret, the time when the work would be completed and the young engineer would no longer pay his weekly and bi-weekly visits.

He said nothing to her of his accident. Why should he? He disliked talking about himself any more than he could help. Moreover, he had an instinctive dread of appearing to ask for sympathy.

He overtook her near the lodge gates as he walked up from the station. She had been in the village for something, and hearing his footsteps behind her, she turned round and waited. It was with a strange tightening of the heartstrings that he hurried forward and took her outstretched hand in his. Her smile seemed to him the most radiant on earth. Her simple "Good-morning, Mr. Lostun," was the sweetest music he had ever heard.

He naturally wished—how could he help it?—that Sophy's voice and smile touched him so. He did his

best not to compare the two girls. He wanted to be loyal to the girl who had promised to be his wife ; he enumerated her good qualities constantly lest he should forget them. But in spite of himself his thoughts strayed away more frequently than he realised to Mary Maxwell.

Mary belonged to so rare a type, so strong and yet so womanly, so sane and yet so merry, so wise and yet so simple and ingenuous.

Also, as time went on, they discovered how much they had in common. Conversation never flagged when they were together ; each seemed to quicken the other's intellectual powers. They drew out of each other all that was best.

When he was with Sophy there were often long and awkward silences. Sophy could chatter, but her chatter led to nothing. No great principle was ever touched, no question of importance was ever unearthed.

He lent her books, hoping to quicken her interest in things of value, but he found out before very long that she did not read them, or if she read, she did not understand.

He tried sometimes to discuss with her the questions of the hour—the political issues that were before the country, the problems that were engaging the attention of the ecclesiastical world, the books that were most read and advertised, but it all ended where he began.

Sometimes he looked through a fashion book with her and discussed the pictures. He wanted to please her, wanted to find out also how much they had in common ; but in spite of all his efforts to beat it back, the feeling of disappointment grew and intensified.

John Lostun meant to be loyal to Sophy, and he found excuses for her wherever and whenever possible.

Also, he wanted to justify himself in his own eyes, which was not always an easy matter.

He grew a little uneasy when he discovered how much he anticipated his visits to Winterholme, and tried to be angry with Mary Maxwell for throwing poor little Sophy so much in the shade. But such anger and such uneasiness always vanished directly he caught sight of Mary's face. Her very presence seemed to change the winter into spring.

He could not help thinking how beautiful she looked as she stood and waited for him to come up. The keen north wind had given her just the amount of colour she needed.

They walked slowly up the long drive together. He was not equal to a rapid walk just yet, and by the time they reached the house he was more exhausted than he knew.

"I am sure you are not well," she said, with a touch of anxiety in her voice, which smote a very tender chord in his heart. "You look quite pale."

"I had to start rather early," he said, with a wan smile; "and the journey down was rather cold."

"I hope you have not caught a chill," she said hastily. "Come into the house and let me give you something warm."

The hot blood rushed to his cheeks in a moment, and as quickly disappeared.

"Please don't trouble," he stammered. "I am really all right."

"I expect you came away without getting a proper breakfast," she said, with a little laugh.

"I fear I did not do justice to it," he answered.

"I thought as much; so I insist on your coming into the house and getting a supplementary breakfast;" and she pushed open the door and led the way.

He followed readily enough, though not without a pang this time. She meant to be kind, he knew, and he loved her for her kindness ; but all unwittingly she was making his battle all the harder to fight.

She made toast for him herself before the dining-room fire, and he watched her as she did it. She was as natural and as free from self-consciousness as a child.

She sat down to table with him at length, declaring that her walk had made her hungry, and the coffee smelt delicious.

"Of course, you will have a slice of ham. : You must be as hungry as a hunter after the cold journey down. I think I'll have a slice of ham myself, if you won't mind carving it. I don't know what mother would say to me, but she needn't know. She's busy at present in school. She will see to everything herself. Thank you very much. I knew you would feel hungry when you began to eat, and really you are looking fifty per cent. better already."

"Then I look what I feel," he answered, with a laugh. "This coffee is as good as a tonic."

Lostun forgot all about dynamos and cut-outs and service-lifts and amperes and volts, and all the other etceteras connected with the work his firm was doing. He forgot that there was any world at all outside that warm, snug dining-room ; forgot that any people existed except himself and Mary Maxwell.

What a delightful hostess she made—kind, thoughtful, but never fussy or obtrusive. The moments sped away unconsciously. Conversation ranged over a dozen subjects. Mary's low voice was as beguiling as a fairy-tale to a child.

The clock ticked on, but he did not heed that the forenoon was weaving rapidly away. Then a chance word brought him back to himself.



"There does not seem much more to do."

He gave a little gasp.

"You will be glad to have us all off the premises?" he said in a questioning tone.

She blushed slightly and hesitated. When she replied her answer was delightfully evasive.

"I have got quite interested in the work; it has been a pleasure to see it growing from day to day."

"It has been a great upset for you, nevertheless."

"The noise has been a little distracting sometimes; but I don't think I have minded very much."

"Anyhow, we shall not trouble you much longer," he said; and he turned his head and looked out of the window.

"I suppose you will run down if anything gets out of order?" she questioned, after a pause.

"I don't anticipate anything going wrong," he replied. "Everything will be tested, of course. After that there should be no difficulty whatever."

"So that when it is in working order you will forsake us altogether?" she questioned, with a smile.

"I am afraid I shall have no further excuse for coming," he answered gravely; and he withdrew his eyes from the window and looked at her.

She did not meet his glance fairly. She wondered what he meant by having no excuse, wondered if he really liked to come, wondered if she welcomed his visits more than she had any right to do.

He, too, wondered whether life would be quite the same again when Mary Maxwell had passed out of it.

He rose at length and apologised for having wasted so much of her time, and then rather hurriedly left the room.

He did not see Mary again during that visit, and

when he got back to town he put in several hours at the office and tried to forget that any such person as Mary existed.

He did not go out to Tottenham that evening. He was too tired, in the first place ; and, in the second place, Tom Verney, a young fellow who occupied an adjoining room, dropped in to have a smoke with him.

Tom was a medical student who was hoping to get through his final within the next few months. He was a genial and optimistic soul who loved life, loved the world, loved his profession, and, generally speaking, was on good terms with everybody. He had become acquainted with Lostun only within the last few months, but the acquaintanceship had ripened into what promised to be a lasting friendship. They did not see a great deal of each other, however, and for the simple reason that both were so busily engaged.

Lostun felt that it was his duty to go out to see Sophy at least two evenings a week, sometimes three, and often enough he remained at the office until nearly bedtime ; while Verney had so much hospital work, and was so eager to get on with his studies, that he did not allow himself too much time for social intercourse.

Lostun was delighted when he heard Verney's cheery voice at the door saying, " May I come in ? " He was due at Tottenham, but he was not at all in the humour for Sophy's society. After a visit to Winterholme, Sophy always seemed more than ever flippant and inconsequential. It was a mistake to see them both on the same day. Hence he was glad of an excuse for staying at home.

Verney did not wait for an answer to his question, but pushed open the door and entered. Lostun

wheeled up an easy-chair for him at once near the fire, and took a seat on the opposite side himself.

"Well, how goes the world with you?" Verney questioned in his cheery way.

"Oh, very well!" Lostun answered. "We are very busy at the office. That's the chief concern with us."

"You're like other people, I suppose—can't bear kicking up your heels in idleness?"

"Except I'm on holiday. I can be as idle as anybody then, and I enjoy it. But when I'm back at work, the busier we are the more I enjoy myself."

"You like your profession?"

"I think it is the most delightful in the world. I wouldn't be in your shoes for a fortune."

"No?"

"I think I'd rather sweep a crossing than be a doctor."

Verney laughed.

"You say that because you don't know anything about it."

"Perhaps so. But have you been cutting up anybody to-day, or watching anybody being cut up?"

"Not to-day. Nothing worse than a few cuts and bruises—not even a broken rib."

"How sad!"

"There'll be plenty of serious cases before the week is out. Those motor-buses promise to make things lively for us."

"They make things lively for everybody."

"They certainly add a new terror to existence," Verney laughed.

"And a new perfume to the sweet scents that hang about the streets."

" Ah, well, we can't have the sweets of civilisation without the bitter, I suppose ! "

" Don't you think we are in danger of getting more bitter than sweet ? "

" I expect that largely depends on ourselves. For my own part, I try to take things philosophically. What's the use of worrying about anything ? "

" Do you never worry ? " Lostun questioned, raising his eyebrows.

" Occasionally, perhaps ; and yet I'm not sure that worry is the proper word. For instance, I'm intensely interested just at present in something that happened a day or two ago at ' The County. '

" Indeed ? "

" I don't suppose you ever heard the story of old Bob Digby, of Longhampton ? "

" He left a lot of money, didn't he ? "

" Tons of it ; but if you've heard the story I need not enter into particulars. "

" I don't think I ever heard the ins and outs of it. "

" You've heard that the real heir disappeared when he was about two years of age ? "

" Well ? "

" Well, if this hospital story is true, it seems as clear as daylight that he's turned up again. "

" But why should he turn up in a hospital ? "

" Oh, that was a mere accident, or a stroke of good luck, or a special dispensation of Providence—just as you like to look at it. Anyhow, he was knocked down by a cab, and taken into ' The County, ' and while the doctors were examining him they discovered certain marks or malformations that established his identity beyond doubt. "

" And he didn't know before who he was ? "

" Hadn't the remotest idea, it seems. You see

I'm so interested because I hail from Longhampton. My Dad's a doctor there, and, of course, knows all the story from top to bottom."

"Was the young fellow much hurt?"

"Very little, it seems. Anyhow, by next morning he didn't seem much worse, and was off like a shot."

"Eager to secure his fortune, I suppose?"

"No doubt about it. I'm wondering when the bomb will burst. The Dad was over this afternoon, and I think I never saw him so excited."

"Does he think the young man will prove his claim?"

"He says he doesn't see very well how it can be set aside. The evidence is so circumstantial. But then, the Dad isn't a lawyer. I confess all my sympathies will go out to Miss Maxwell."

Lostun gave a sudden start, but did not reply.

"She's a real gem of a girl," Verney went on. "Old Digby prophesied that the money would carry a curse with it; but she's missing the curse by employing the money for the good of other people."

"And you approve of her conduct?"

"Don't I! It's a treat in this sordid age to find anybody who can rise superior to the passion for gold."

"Perhaps, as she cares so little about money, she'll not dispute the other's claim."

"If left to herself, I don't believe she will; but her future husband——"

"Her future what?" he interjected, half rising from his chair.

"She's engaged to a lawyer," Verney said, without seeming to notice Lostun's access of interest—"a

man who has an eye on both worlds. He'll no doubt persuade her to fight the matter to the last."

Lostun knocked the ashes out of his pipe on a bar of the grate, and then began to refill it again in silence.

## CHAPTER XX

### CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

FOR several minutes the young men smoked in silence. Verney imagined that Lostun was not particu' rly interested in the story. Lostun was afraid that he had betrayed too much feeling.

Why the news that Mary Maxwell was engaged should agitate him so much he did not know. To do him justice, he had never dreamed of her except in the light of an acquaintance. That she was the most attractive woman he had ever met he frankly admitted. That she answered to his ideal as no other woman had ever done was beyond all question ; but he had recognised the inevitable from the first. She was as much beyond his reach as were the stars. He could admire—worship, if he chose—but possession was impossible. Even if he were not engaged to another he would have indulged in no hopes of winning one so completely beyond his sphere. He was no fortune-hunter, and her wealth alone would have kept him at a distance.

Yet for some inexplicable reason the news that she was engaged jarred every nerve he possessed. She seemed to him a creature to be idealised, not to be thrown into the worry and turmoil of domestic life. Moreover, he knew no man who was worthy to possess

her, and if, as he feared, David Smart was the favoured individual, there was additional reason for regret.

He had met David once—at the time the contract was signed—and he had felt no desire to meet him again. He had nothing against him. He was civil and polite and conciliatory. In fact, he had reason to think that Cleveland, Glover & Co. got the contract largely through the lawyer's influence. But for all that he was not impressed in his favour. His suave and purring manner and his effusive deference to Mary Maxwell seemed to him to be overdone.

He remarked at length, as if thinking aloud—

"I am at one with you, Verney. My sympathies go out to the lady."

"If you knew her and all the good she is doing you would be enthusiastically on her side."

"I have heard of her good works on several occasions."

"Ah! But you should see her. She is really awfully pretty, and she puts on no more side than if she hadn't a penny."

"Why should rich people put on side?" Lostun questioned, with a laugh.

"I don't know why they should," Verney answered; "but they nearly always do, especially those who get rich suddenly."

"There must be a lot of 'suddenly rich' people in England," Lostun remarked quietly.

"You have found that out, have you?"

"At any rate, there is a good deal more of what you call 'side' than we have across the water."

"But you worship the almighty dollar almost more than we do."

"I agree with you," Lostun said, with a smile.

"But there is this difference. We worship the dollars :



you worship the man who possesses the dollars. It makes me angry sometimes to see how you kowtow to a clown simply because he has money, and sniff at the gentleman because he is poor. I'm unconsciously getting into the same rut myself."

"I don't think you are," Verney said laughingly. "I've seen no evidence of it yet."

"But about this Miss Maxwell," Lostun continued.

"You say she's engaged to be married?"

"So it is generally understood, and to a man nearly twice her own age. A most excellent fellow in many ways—a little too religious for some people, but a keen man of business, and a man of considerable influence in the town."

"Does she love him, do you think?"

The question came out suddenly, after a long pause.

Verney looked at his friend for a moment, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

"I expect she does, or thinks she does, which is much the same thing," he answered. "But a woman marries for a good deal besides love."

Lostun glanced up with a questioning look in his eyes.

"You see," Verney went on, "a woman like Mary Maxwell wants someone to advise her, someone who understands business. Do you see? Now, David Smart knows more about her affairs than she knows herself. He was one of old Digby's executors. After the death of the other two he had the entire management of the estate. He has the whole thing at his finger ends. In fact, he's essential to her. I don't see how she could get on without him."

"Then the marriage will be a business arrangement?"

"Mainly, I should say. Of course, if she's made up her mind to love him she'll do it. Women can do anything they make up their minds to in that line."

It was Lostun's turn to laugh now.

"Verney," he said, "for one so young you talk like an oracle."

"My governor says just what I've been saying to you," Verney replied seriously. "David Smart has waited for her for twenty years. He has seen her grow up from childhood, watched over her interests, made himself agreeable and necessary. For my part I think he deserves the prize."

"But if she loses all her fortune, what then?"

"I won't prophesy until I know," Verney said, with a laugh. "It will be a poser for Smart, anyhow."

For several moments there was silence, then Lostun said slowly—

"I think I'm beginning to waver, Verney."

"Ah!"

And Verney took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at his companion.

"If the lawyer marries Miss Maxwell the money will be his to all intents and purposes."

"Well?"

"Why should an intriguer get it?"

"That's a strong word, isn't it?"

"Not too strong if you have correctly stated the facts. The man's a fortune-hunter, and if Miss Maxwell's the noble woman you represent her to be, he doesn't deserve her. I rather hope she'll lose the fortune, and in doing so lose him."

"But, my dear Lostun, there's a good deal more involved than you see."

"How so?"

"Mary Maxwell is a philanthropist. She's doing heaps of good—more than anybody knows. Smart is in perfect sympathy with all her schemes. If she marries him her good work will still go on. But if the real heir turns up and proves his claim, the chances are there'll be a sudden end to it all."

"It may be so, of course; but it does not necessarily follow. Has anything been discovered as to the kind of life he's been leading?"

"I don't know. The Dad was in a considerable fog on several points."

"It may turn out that he's a very decent fellow."

"And it may turn out that he's a low scoundrel."

"Still, the chances are in his favour."

"Why so?"

"Because there are more good people in the world than bad ones."

"Do you think so?"

"I do, most sincerely. What you call 'low scoundrels' are comparatively few when you think of the entire population."

"Perhaps you are right," Verney said, rising slowly to his feet and knocking the ashes out of his pipe.

"Anyhow, I expect the next few days will bring revelations. I shall be curious to know the upshot."

"So shall I," Lostun answered.

So they parted. Lostun closed the door softly behind his friend, and then went back to his easy-chair by the fire.

It was midnight when he went to bed. Try as he would he could not keep his thoughts away from Mary Maxwell. He indulged in no speculations respecting the alleged heir. Who he was or how he had lived were no concerns of his. His whole interest in the

matter was associated with Mary Maxwell. If he had never met her he would have dismissed the subject from his mind without a second thought, but she had so touched his heart and imagination that he knew that whatever affected her would have an interest for him.

As the moments sped away he found his dislike of David Smart steadily growing. This was no doubt pure jealousy, unintentional jealousy it may be conceded, but jealousy all the same. He would have been jealous of his friend Verney if he had loved Mary Maxwell. But that a man of the type of David Smart should propose to marry her was a piece of impertinence too outrageous to be even tolerated for a single moment.

He was vaguely conscious that he was getting on the edge of slippery ground. For, after all, it was no concern of his what Mary Maxwell did or did not. He had shaped his own domestic future before he made her acquaintance, and whether she married or remained single could make no difference to him. But notwithstanding that this thought fixed itself permanently at the back of his brain, he refused to give heed to it.

Could it be possible that this gentle-eyed girl, so sweet, so modest, so womanly, could give herself in marriage to that smooth-faced lawyer, with his fleshy lips and constantly shifting eyes?

"I hope the heir will turn up," he said to himself, with vehemence. "She won't mind. The money is a burden to her, and any loss would be gain that rids her of the fellow."

The following evening he went out to Tottenham. Dr. Wilks seemed greatly surprised to see him. In fact, he was so taken aback when he opened the door

in response to Lostun's ring that he was scarcely able to stammer a welcome.

"I—I see you are better," he said, eyeing his visitor curiously.

"Oh, I am all right again," Lostun said indifferently. "Where's Sophy?"

"She's gone out to do some shopping. She won't be many minutes. I don't think she expected you."

"Why not?"

"Well, you looked so out of sorts the other day that she feared you were in for an illness."

"I should have written if anything ailed me."

"But are you sure you are all right again? I confess I was alarmed myself the last time you were here."

"I am quite right, I assure you."

"Pardon me. I've no wish to alarm you; but—but will you let me feel your pulse again?"

Lostun held out his hand rather unwillingly. Wilks pressed the tips of his fingers on his wrist, and his face assumed a very grave expression.

"Did you take the mixture I gave you the other day?" he questioned anxiously at length.

"I fear I didn't," Lostun answered, with a laugh.

"Ah, that was foolish of you. You are in for a breakdown unless you are very careful."

"I'm always careful," Lostun answered abruptly.

"You think you are. All young people have that idea;" and Dr. Wilks smiled gravely. "However, there is not much harm yet. But tell me, why didn't you take the medicine I gave you?"

"I forgot all about it."

"Just like a young man in love. Well, well! I was once young myself."

Lostun winced, but did not reply.

"But you must look after your health," Wilks went on. "You must indeed! It will never do for you to let yourself run down as you have been doing. I'll give you some tabloids. Take one to-night on getting into bed, and another first thing to-morrow morning."

And Dr. Wilks hurriedly left the room.

In a few moments he was back again, holding a tiny packet between his finger and thumb.

"Slip these into your waistcoat pocket," he said, "and don't forget to take one last thing to-night."

Lostun took the packet and dropped it into his pocket. And a moment or two later Sophy came into the room.

"Hallo, Jack, is that you?" she exclaimed. "Father said he was sure you wouldn't be well enough to come."

"I said I was afraid he wouldn't be," Dr. Wilks interposed mildly. "And, indeed, Lostun is anything but up to par now."

"Anyhow, you look heaps better," Sophy went on, without heeding her father.

"And I feel quite as well as I look," Lostun replied, with a laugh.

"My dear fellow, feelings are deceptive," Dr. Wilks chimed in. "You take my advice and don't run any risks."

And with a benevolent smile he turned and left the room.

Left alone, Sophy began to wheedle Lostun into proposing an early day for the marriage, and so much skill did she display, that Lostun was quite disarmed. He had never seen her so shy, so diffident, and so entirely charming before. He began to have qualms of conscience. He felt as though he had misjudged her—

had not given her credit for those deeper qualities she evidently possessed.

When he saw the tears glisten on her eyelashes, he felt that he had received a fresh revelation. He learned for the first time that she was not entirely happy in her home life. She made the best of it—tried to be cheerful when her heart was heavy, and kept back the bitter tears by a pretence of flippancy.

Did he think she had no feelings ; no vision of great things ; no longing to be wise and good ? Did he think she cared only for dress and pleasure and admiration ? To have a little home of her own, free from bickering, and in which love ruled—that was her ideal. She did not undervalue pretty things and expensive things, of course. She would not turn up her nose at wealth if it came her way ; but there was something better than money.

What a girl longed for—especially a girl who had never known a mother's love, and who had to contend for years and years with a bad-tempered father—what such a girl longed for was protection and sympathy.

Lostun rested Sophy's sunny head on his shoulder and kissed her. Her tears seemed to touch a new chord in his nature, a closer bond of sympathy grew up between them.

The picture of a little home of his own, free from bickering, and in which love ruled, touched him to the quick. He had often dreamed of such a home as he sat in his lonely diggings. Why should he wait for it ? He was getting a good salary. Sophy was not ambitious for a large house. She would like to get away from Tottenham—he was not greatly surprised at that ; but beyond that she asked for nothing but his love and protection and sympathy.

She let fall some hints that her father wanted to marry again. She felt herself more and more in the way. She had tried to wear a bright and cheerful face, but sometimes it had been very difficult.

And then the tears came afresh into her pretty eyes.

What could Lostun do? This pretty, shy, tearful creature had promised to be his wife some day.

Some day! No date had ever shaped itself in his mind. There was no occasion for hurry. A year or two hence, when his balance at the bank was much larger than at present. He deprecated hasty marriages.

As he journeyed homeward that evening he wondered how it had come about. What had induced him to press Sophy for an early date? He certainly had had no such idea in his mind when he went out to Tottenham.

Before he reached his lodgings a reaction had set in, and he began to take himself severely to task. This was the second time he had done what he had had no intention of doing. Such weakness and indecision in a man was inexcusable.

On the table in his room he found a telegram which had been sent on from the office. It had evidently arrived only a few minutes after he left.

He tore it open at once and read—

“Something gone wrong with machinery. Please come early to-morrow. MAXWELL.”

For a moment he smiled, then he frowned, then he smiled again.

The face of Sophy vanished from his mind, and in its place came the sweeter, nobler face of Mary Maxwell.



He put out the light and went upstairs to bed in a curiously uncertain state of mind. So perplexed and ill at ease did he feel that he forgot all about the tabloids. Nor did he remember them again until several days afterwards.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A TALK BY THE WAY

**I**T was noon when Lostun reached Winterholme. Mary Maxwell greeted him with a perplexed and troubled look in her eyes, and began to explain at once what appeared to be wrong with the electrical plant.

Lostun listened without speaking, but he saw in a moment that there was something on her mind that troubled her far more than the failure of the machinery to act, and he wondered if the long-lost heir had already put in an appearance.

"I am sorry to bring you here on a Saturday," Mary concluded; "but Parsons did not seem to know exactly what had gone wrong."

"He ought to know, anyhow," Lostun answered; "for from what you tell me it is a very simple matter."

"You see, he's new to it yet, and perhaps a bit nervous. You mustn't be hard on him."

"Oh, I don't mind coming down in the least," Lostun said, with a laugh. "In fact, I intended coming down on Monday, in any case, to see that everything was running smoothly."

They walked away together to the little engine-room at the rear of the house, and in five minutes everything was in working order once more. Lostun gave Parsons a page of instructions which Mary

grasped much more quickly than the man did. Then, with a final look round, he took his leave.

"It seems a shame to bring you down from town for so small a matter," Mary said, as they walked away together.

"Nothing is really small or unimportant," he said, with a smile, "where machinery is concerned. Moreover, engines have to be humoured a bit sometimes, like other things."

"I expect Parsons will get into the way of it after a while," she replied absently. Then, suddenly pulling herself together, she said—

"You will stay and have lunch with us, won't you?"

For a moment he hesitated, then he answered quite frankly—

"I shall be delighted to do so."

"There is something I should like to tell you," she said diffidently; then paused, whilst a hot wave of colour mounted to her neck and face.

He did not speak, neither did he look at her; but he guessed fairly accurately what she was going to say.

"I have had a surprise this morning," she went on at length, "a very great surprise; and I want the frank and unbiassed opinion of someone whose judgment I can respect."

"Yes?" he said in a questioning tone, but he did not look at her.

"I think you will be frank," she said, with the ghost of a smile lighting up her face.

He turned his head and smiled gravely, but he did not speak.

"You have heard, of course, how I came to inherit Robert Digby's money?" she questioned.

He inclined his head in token of assent.

"I did not want the money, Heaven knows," she went on. "I was afraid of the old man's prophecy that a curse would accompany it, and up to the present I have not touched a penny of the principal, nor even spent all the income, and I have been careful not to waste anything on myself——"

He looked into her eyes and smiled again ; and, after a moment's pause, she continued—

"I have always seen the possibility of the real heir turning up. There has never been any proof of his death. He disappeared, as you have perhaps heard, when a child of two or three, and it really looked as if he had been spirited away in my interests. If I had been able to walk at the time I believe I should have been accused of kidnapping him. I believe some unkind people did suggest that mother did it—though she was in bed at the time, and had been for several weeks. Well, when the twenty years had passed, and nothing had been heard of John Digby, the property, of course, came to me, and for a year or two I have been playing the part of stewardess to the best of my ability."

"Yes ? "

"Well, now comes the really strange part of it all. According to the *Longhampton Post* of this morning John Digby has been found. His identity seems to have been proved beyond dispute, and I am expecting every moment that he will appear on the scene."

"Well ? "

"The question that is worrying me is, what about the money that I have spent ? You see for two years I have been using money that is not mine, and to which I have no claim. Suppose this John Digby should demand the money back again ? "

"I really cannot suppose any such thing," he answered quietly. "I know little or nothing about your English law, but I know that no man—with the instincts of a man—would ever dream of making any such claim."

"But if you were in my place, Mr. Lostun, would you feel that you were in debt, and that it would be your duty to try and pay it back?"

"Indeed, no," he answered sharply and emphatically. "In default of young Digby you were the true heir. You could not help yourself. You were named in the will. Besides, as I understand the matter, young Digby not having been heard of all these years, is legally dead. You had to take possession willy-nilly, and if you have to give it back, you will be able to hand over every shred of scrip and stock to which you came into possession."

"I have not touched a penny of the principal," she said quietly.

"And will you relinquish your claim without a contest?"

She smiled a little wistfully.

"There is no pleasure in being rich," she said, "unless, perhaps, you are born to it. I have never been really happy since this big responsibility was laid upon me. And if I am quite satisfied that this young man is John Digby—why, I shall be only too glad to let him take possession."

"But you will surely regret to see your good work come to a sudden end?"

"Of course, there is a dark side to everything," she said, looking away across the wide stretch of country. "But God will take care of His own. I am only a woman, and perhaps all my schemes were not wise."

"Why do you say that?"

"My legal adviser and best friend, Mr. David Smart, has often shaken his head at them."

"But that proves nothing, surely?" he questioned, with a rush of colour to his cheeks.

They had walked away a long distance from the house, and were skirting the outer edge of the grounds. The path was narrow, and every few steps they almost jostled each other. Once or twice when she turned her head he fancied he felt her warm breath on his face, and every now and then the scent of violets reached his nostrils. He was quite unconscious of time and place; the one real thing was the presence of Mary Maxwell. She seemed to create an atmosphere of warmth and peace; the musical cadence of her voice soothed him like a lullaby. When in her presence he seemed to be perfectly happy and at peace with himself and the world.

At the mention of David Smart's name, however, the atmosphere changed in a moment, and the peace of his heart gave place to sudden strife. Mary Maxwell might be nothing to him—never could be anything to him, for were not his affections engaged, and had not Sophy Wilks a claim upon him? And yet the thought of David Smart getting possession of this beautiful girl—dominating her will, and controlling her actions—was wormwood and gall to him.

"It is not easy to be sure of one's self," Mary answered, after a long pause. "You see, people toadied to me because I had money, flattered me because I might give them help, praised me, perhaps in the hope of reward. That is one of the penalties of having money. It makes you doubt people. You never know who is sincere—you begin to wonder in time if anybody is sincere. When I am poor again, I shall

be able to find out who my real friends are—that will be something to the good.”

“ I thought women knew by a kind of instinct the genuine from the counterfeit.”

“ Not always, I think. Oh no. Think how often women are deceived.”

“ Are they really deceived ? Don’t you think they just close their eyes, and hope for the impossible ? If a woman marries a bad man, don’t you think she knows it beforehand—feels it, if you will allow the expression ? ”

“ But, you see, the trouble is a woman doubts her judgment, doubts her instincts, and fears to follow her intuitions.”

“ Then she ought not to say, when the truth comes out, that she has been deceived.”

“ We all want to hope for the best,” was the quick answer.

“ We like to follow our inclinations,” he said, with a laugh.

“ Do we ? It might be better for some of us if we did ; ” and she raised to him a pair of bright, inquiring eyes.

“ I am not so sure of that,” he said, slowly and seriously.

“ Do you think so badly of human nature, then, that you fancy our inclinations must necessarily be wrong ? If we desire a thing very much, is that *prima facie* evidence that we oughtn’t to have it ? ”

“ Ah, now you have cornered me,” he said, laughing ; “ and I am not going to commit myself to any definite opinion on the subject.”

“ Ah, Mr. Lostun, that is scarcely heroic of you to run away from your own contention ; ” and she smiled brightly into his face.

“ Did I say that if we followed our own inclinations

we were certain to go wrong?" he questioned, pretending to become serious all at once.

"You seemed to imply it, at any rate."

"Then I must withdraw the implication as far as other people are concerned. But I am still of opinion that my own inclinations would lead me a long way astray."

"What an awful confession to make."

"It is rather bad, isn't it? Still, truth will out, you know."

"I am not yet convinced that it is truth," she said, laughing.

He darted at her a quick, searching glance, and then his eyes fell. Would it be so wrong, after all, to follow his inclinations? Was his conception of duty necessarily a right one? He felt that he would willingly give all he possessed if he might follow his inclinations now, but he crushed the feeling back quickly and resolutely.

They had turned again towards the house, and he heaved a little sigh at the thought that their walk and talk had so nearly come to an end. He wondered if they would meet again, or if they would drift apart for all time. For several minutes they walked along in silence. Then Mary said—

"I am glad we have had this little talk."

"Yes."

"I shall feel easier in my mind now that I have had your candid and unbiassed opinion."

"Perhaps the story in the newspaper is all an invention."

"It is too circumstantial for that," she answered thoughtfully. "I cannot conceive of anyone inventing the story."

"Of course, time will tell," he answered, after a



brief pause ; " though, to be candid, the story doesn't hang well together."

" No ? "

" It seems incredible—with all the publicity given—that the real heir could have grown up in ignorance of his identity."

" Unless he has lived out of the country."

" And you have no information on that point ? "

" None whatever."

" If he turns up to-day, that is one of the first points he will have to clear up."

" To tell you the truth," she said, raising her eyes frankly to his, " I am getting impatient for him to put in an appearance."

" You will have an interesting time of it," he said, with a laugh.

" I do not know. There is a possibility of the interview being painful rather than interesting."

" But, of course, the final appeal will be to the Law Courts," he said. " It is not a question you can decide for yourself."

" If I have the written evidence of qualified doctors," she said, turning away her eyes, " that will be quite enough."

" But if that evidence should not prove conclusive ? "

" Then he is not John Digby," she answered quickly.

" If he is the real heir, there will be no room for doubt."

" It is an interesting case," he said reflectively.

" I shall be curious to know the end of it."

" Everybody will know in good time," she answered.

" But from what the paper says this morning I have practically no doubt as to his identity. What I am most curious about is, the kind of man he is."

" They say that fortune favours the brave," he said, with a smile.

"Ah, but what is fortune, Mr. Lostun?" she questioned sharply. "To inherit a lot of money may be a calamity. I almost pity the man, whoever he is. If he is a good man to-day, he may be utterly corrupted by this time next year."

"The money has not corrupted you, Miss Maxwell."

"I have never regarded it as my own. Had I done so—— Ah, well, I don't know."

"Perhaps your successor will have equal courage."

"If John Digby is alive, the money is his beyond all dispute. There will be no question of the real heir turning up."

"He may regard it as a trust, all the same. Don't you think the conviction is steadily growing and deepening that we are only stewards at the best?"

"I had not thought of it, Mr. Lostun. I was rather afraid the opposite idea was gaining ground. As I have looked round, it has seemed to me that wealth was becoming more and more conscienceless."

"I don't think so," he answered. "I hope not, in any case."

"I may be growing suspicious—perhaps uncharitable," she said, with a pathetic smile; "but it seems to me the passion for money is eating out the best that is in men, and the possession of money far oftener curses than it blesses. Can anything be more heartless or conscienceless than the wild, reckless scramble that one sees on every hand?"

"Competition in these days is very keen, I admit," he said thoughtfully; "but through all the strife I think conscience is making itself heard more and more."

"I am glad to hear you say so. Of course, you know the world better than I do. I hear only echoes of it, as it were; but I confess my experience during

the last year or two has made me very sad—sometimes very angry.”

“ You have been a good deal in the public eye,” he suggested.

“ No, it is not that altogether. But it pained me that people who never recognised me before began to make much of me directly I had become an heiress. I really believe that a lot of people think more of money than they do of character. It is the gold standard everywhere, not only in the social world, but in the religious world. I am not sure that the Church is not the greatest sinner of all in this respect. All denominations make obeisance to their rich men. The man in tattered raiment may remain outside.”

“ There is a reason for that,” he said quietly. “ No large and complex organisation can be worked without money.”

“ But why sacrifice everything for the sake of the organisation? Is not Christianity more than ecclesiasticism? ”

“ I am afraid you are getting beyond me now,” he said, with a smile. “ I go to church and give what I can afford, and leave the rest.”

She coloured almost painfully, and was silent for several moments.

“ Please forgive me,” she said at length. “ I don’t want to be uncharitable, but I sometimes feel that Robert Digby’s money has done me harm already. I have tried to avoid the curse predicted, but I’m not sure that I have done so altogether. So many hypocrites have come whining to me that I have grown suspicious, in spite of myself. So many sycophants have fawned upon me and flattered me that I have become cynical. Oh, Mr. Lostun, never pray for riches.”

He laughed good-humouredly.

"I have never regarded prayer as the royal road to riches," he said, "but rather the reverse."

"Yes, yes! I think you are right in that," she said, smiling pathetically. "But here we are at the house again. I am sure you must be ready for your lunch?"

When he left an hour later, Mary walked with him as far as the lodge gates, and when she said good-bye to him there was a look in her eyes that he had never seen before.

He held her hand in his only for a moment, and hurried away without a second glance. He feared that if he lingered over that good-bye he might lose control of himself. He could remember in his lifetime no parting that carried with it such a sense of desolation. He felt as though the sun had suffered an eclipse. There was no brightness or beauty anywhere.

He hurried on to the station without looking once behind him. He would have to shut down the lid now, and turn the key in the lock.

He had just time to reach the station and purchase a copy of the *Longhampton Post* when the train came in. As he settled himself in a corner of the compartment he saw Mr. David Smart pass along the platform toward the place of exit.

Lostin watched him with a curiously eager light in his eyes, watched him till he passed beyond the barrier and disappeared.

Then he settled himself down to read the newspaper description of the lost heir, and the story of his discovery.

## CHAPTER XXII

### DAVID SMART IS ALARMED

MARY MAXWELL was in the dining-room alone when David Smart was announced. She was thinking of Lostun at the time—thinking what a brave, manly fellow he was ; and how free from cant, and meanness, and pretence. She had grown to admire him immensely. He was so frank and outspoken, and yet so charitable. She was sorry that his work at Winterholme was completed. She had got into the habit of looking forward to his visits.

It was not easy to realise that he had gone away this time without expectation of coming back. Probably they had said good-bye for the last time. There was something distinctly painful in the reflection. His going had created a blank that would not be easy to fill.

She looked up with a start when David was announced, and rose at once to welcome him. He came forward stiffly and awkwardly. He had not yet time to digest the news with which Longhampton was ringing, hence his manner was nervous and uncertain.

He rarely troubled himself to read the local Press. His opinion of provincial journals and journalism need not be recorded. His managing clerk showed him the *Longhampton Post*, with its startling announcement, as he was leaving the office for lunch.

David turned back again and closed the door, and locked it. When he reappeared his face was white and his step unsteady. He did not go home to lunch, but turned his steps towards the railway station, and took the first train to Daveley. In the train he read the article again, and while he did so he indulged in language much stronger than he used on ordinary occasions.

"What has that fool Wilks been about?" he muttered to himself again and again.

As yet he had no clear idea in his mind as to what was to be done. He would have to be guided by circumstances. The only thing he felt certain about was that the claim of the so-called heir would have to be resisted by every means in his power.

He had been in tight places before, but this was the tightest he had ever known. He had felt near the edge of the precipice when Albert Wilks called on him, but he was hanging over now. How long he could hang on he did not know, and whether he could ever clamber back to a place of security was more than doubtful; but he was not the man to abandon hope while a single chance remained. What good would be accomplished by his going to see Mary Maxwell he did not know. But he had a feeling that the sooner he faced the issue with her the better.

It was just possible, of course, that she was ignorant of the news with which all Longhampton was agog at that moment. But she was bound to hear it sooner or later. It might be all to the good if she heard it from his lips. He might be able to counteract the first impression and the first impulse.

The fear that haunted him was that she might be disposed to give up her case at the outset. He knew how little she cared for the money, and how glad she

would be to be freed from further responsibility. That was a danger to be guarded against at the very outset. He would have to prove to her that it was a religious duty to fight the matter to the very end.

There was a great deal more at stake than anyone knew except himself. While he had only a woman to deal with, who had unlimited faith in his honesty and business capacity, he had very little to fear. If that woman became his wife he had nothing to fear at all.

But if a man came on the scene—a man who understood business, and would take nothing for granted: a man who would insist on seeing every voucher and checking every entry:—

He broke into a cold perspiration at the bare suggestion of such a thing.

“That is a contingency that must be avoided at all cost,” he said to himself. “And yet how it is to be avoided I don’t know. If anything happens to the fellow now, suspicion will be aroused in a moment. What a dawdling fool that Wilks has been.”

He tried to pull himself together, and put a bold face on the matter as he walked up the long slope toward Winterholme, but his nervousness was apparent in every movement.

He made no attempt to play the lover when Mary rose to greet him. Love was a mere side issue. It was not love that had lured him on for more than twenty years, it was lucre. And now the sense of impending calamity threw everything else into shadow—even the gold seemed to grow dim before his eyes.

“I am glad to find you alone, Mary,” he said, speaking rapidly, and glancing swiftly round the room. “I don’t know if you have seen to-day’s *Post*. If not——”

"I read it before breakfast," she answered quietly.

"Then you are acquainted with the story that is going the rounds, and setting all the gossips by the ears?"

"I know only what is in the newspaper," she answered.

"That is as much as anybody knows," he replied, with a nervous twitching of the lips, "and as much as anybody ever will know, I expect. I came over for the express purpose of putting you on your guard. The story is an invention, without doubt. Don't believe a word of it, Mary."

"Faith depends on evidence," she said, "and the day may come when I shall be compelled to believe every word of it."

"And what then, may I ask?"

"Surely you do not need any answer to such a question?" she asked, with a surprised look in her eyes.

"I am a lawyer, Mary, in the first place," he said; "and in the second place, I am your affianced husband, and in both capacities I have to act for you. This is a case in which sentiment must not be tolerated for a moment."

"I don't quite understand, David, what you mean by that," she said quietly. "But one thing ought to be clear to us both, that right must be done at all costs."

"That is quite true, no doubt; but we must first understand what right is. Not mere abstract right, which will, perhaps, most strongly appeal to you, but the law of the land must be observed. You must remember that Harry Digby's son has been legally dead these last fifteen years."

"But suppose he is actually alive?"



"His right to dispossess you will have to be contested. You are in possession; is that nothing? You talk about right being done at all costs. But is it right that you should be flung penniless upon the world?"

"I shall not be penniless," she answered. "Our school is more prosperous than ever. Besides, have you not——"

Then she stopped suddenly and walked to the window, leaving the sentence unfinished.

He did not finish the sentence for her, though he knew well enough what she meant to say.

For several moments there was silence in the room; then he said slowly—

"I feared, Mary, you might be disposed to take this quixotic view of the situation. That is the reason I came over at once."

Her eyes flashed in a moment.

"Quixotic view of the situation?" and she turned suddenly round and faced him. "What do you mean, David?"

"I mean what I say, Mary," he answered, in hurt tones. "You have not been trained to business, and your heart sometimes runs away with your head. Hence, if the worst comes to the worst, I shall have to exercise the authority I possess as your legal adviser and your affianced husband."

"But if you are convinced that this young man is Harry Digby's son and Robert Digby's heir, you surely will not throw a single obstacle in his path?"

"I think we will not discuss that further now," he said, with a patronising smile. "What saith the Scriptures? 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' We will see the young man first—that is, if he has sufficient courage to show his face."

"Why talk about courage? If he knows he is Harry Digby's son, he will, of course, claim his rights."

"If he knows! Yes, yes!" And he laughed uneasily. "That, of course, raises the whole question. If he knows——"

"The paper says he does know, and that the evidence is indisputable."

"Then why has he not shown himself either to you or to me? He discovered himself, or was discovered—so says the oracle—on Tuesday or Wednesday last. It is now Saturday. Why, if he is able to demonstrate his identity, has he not taken action?" and Mr. Smart laughed again.

"I do not know. Perhaps he is getting legal advice. There may be many reasons."

"Believe me, Mary, the whole story is a fiction," he said scornfully, "an attempt to impose on your good-nature. Let me implore you to be on your guard. Commit yourself to nothing! If the young fellow calls on you, refuse to see him, and send him to me;" and he rose suddenly and looked towards the door.

"You are not going?" she questioned, in a tone of surprise.

"I am sorry, but to-morrow is the Sabbath, and I have made no preparation for the services yet."

She did not attempt to detain him. Deep down in her heart she was thankful that he was making his visit so brief.

"Tell your mother I am sorry to have missed her," he said, buttoning his coat.

"You may meet her on the way to the station."

"I will look out for her. Now, don't forget what I have told you. Keep a cool head and a steady nerve;"

and he kissed her on the forehead, and hurriedly took his leave.

She did not offer to walk with him to the lodge gates. She preferred to remain in the house and look at the pictures in the fire. She was conscious of a curious sense of unrest and uncertainty. Life seemed more or less of a cheat, a taunting shadow of a beautiful but impossible reality, a disappointing compromise.

She had received two visits that day—one from a mere acquaintance, the other from her lover. They had both discussed the same subject, but how different the spirit and temper displayed by the two men. If only the two men could change places! And she sighed unconsciously.

David Smart had never realised her ideal, but he was farther away than ever from it that day. Why was he so eager about the money, so contemptuous of the moral issue involved? He had revealed that afternoon a new side to his character. She had believed all along that he had wanted her for herself alone, that her money had not influenced him in the least, that he was altogether too other-worldly to hanker after material things.

Had she been mistaken? What had become of that beautiful altruism which he so constantly preached? From the beginning of his visit to the end he had displayed one anxiety only—not an anxiety that justice might be done or that right should prevail, but an anxiety to keep the true heir, if he were alive, out of possession.

The lover, the altruist, even the moralist had for the moment disappeared. The man of the world—hard, relentless, and even unjust, had stood before her.

Why this breathless anxiety that she should keep her hand on old Robert Digby's gold? He knew that

she had never wanted it, that she had been afraid of it, that from the beginning she had always hoped that the true heir would turn up. Why, then, this intense and burning anxiety that she should keep possession of it? Would he have been so anxious if she had been engaged to marry some other man?

Then her thoughts strayed away to John Lostun. How different had been the tone of his conversation. He had not seemed to attach much value to the fortune. He had taken it for granted that no attempt would be made to resist the right. Was that because he had no personal interest in the money, or was it because his outlook on life was truer and saner?

She was unable to give any satisfactory answer to these questions. She feared that money corrupted all whom it touched.

"If he were going to marry me," she said to herself—and her cheeks flamed crimson at the thought—"I dare say he would be just as eager as David is that I should keep my hand on the money."

And yet her heart protested against this conclusion as being unfair and unjust. He had spoken to her that morning about a woman's intuition. Perhaps he was right. She had been trying to reason her way to every conclusion. What if her logic was altogether at fault?

John Lostun walked out of the terminus and threaded his way through quiet streets to his lodgings in Bloomsbury like a man in a dream.

He was interested, as any other man would have been, in the story told in the *Longhampton Post*—more interested than some, because he knew one of the principal actors in the little drama.

He had not read many paragraphs, however, before

he became intensely excited. The description given of the missing heir—and which he now read for the first time—was a description of himself. Moreover, a portrait of the child, taken only a few weeks before his disappearance—which was reproduced in the paper—seemed almost identical with the portrait of himself taken by the authorities at St. Louis, and circulated broadcast through the town. There was only one link missing—the mark on the left shoulder-blade, of which a detailed description was given. That was a matter that could be set at rest in five minutes after he got to his lodgings.

Never did a railway journey seem so long to him before. He tried his hardest not to be excited, but he found himself shaking from head to foot as though smitten with ague. Perhaps at last the secret of his birth and early childhood was to be cleared up. Perhaps—but a hundred questions seemed to struggle in his brain at the same time, and he had no power to disentangle them.

It would be useless to speculate about anything until the one supreme point had been made clear, foolish to indulge in any vain hopes or utopian dreams.

He read the article over and over again. The hospital part of the story did not fit his own case in important particulars. He had not remained over night, neither had he been confronted with the marks of his own identity.

He told himself that some other person was intended all the while ; that possibly the real heir was by this time at Winterholme, talking to Mary Maxwell ; that it was only a coincidence that he answered to the description in so many particulars.

But imagination had swifter wings than logic. He

found himself in the realm of speculation before he knew. The actual world vanished again and again, and he found himself in a world of dreams.

He gave a big sigh of relief when he found himself at length at his journey's end. He let himself into the house with a latchkey, and hanging his hat and overcoat in the hall, ran lightly upstairs to his own bedroom.

Never in all his life had he been in such a fever of excitement. Never had so many issues trembled in the balance. He sat down for several moments to recover his breath.

He was not concerned about Bob Digby's fortune—that was a mere side issue. The desire that rose above all things was to know the secret of his birth—to unravel that mystery had been the passion of his life. He had almost given up hope of ever doing it, and yet the passion remained intense and quenchless as ever.

Now, at last, after long waiting and hoping, it seemed as if the secret was about to spring into light. Would he be disappointed, or would hope find its full fruition?

His legs trembled so much that he could hardly stand. His fingers seemed benumbed. His teeth chattered as though a cold shower had been let loose upon him.

Then he pulled himself together by a supreme effort. A hand-mirror lay on the dressing-table.

"In another moment," he said to himself, "I shall know."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE SECRET OUT

JOHN LOSTUN sat in a wicker chair with the hand-mirror still in his hand, when a knock came to his bedroom door. He started as though a bomb had exploded at his feet, and stared eagerly round him. The room was in almost complete darkness. How long he had sat there he did not know.

"Yes?" he called in a voice that sounded to him strange and far away.

"Your dinner is waiting, sir."

"My dinner? Oh yes; thank you very much. I'll be down in about five minutes."

He pulled down the blind and switched on the electric light, then stared at himself again in the glass.

Five minutes later he descended the stairs slowly, holding fast to the banister. He still felt weak and uncertain about the knees.

He helped himself to his dinner almost unconsciously, and more from force of habit than anything else. He was neither hungry nor the reverse. He was quite oblivious to his surroundings. He went through his dinner mechanically, not knowing what he ate. His mind was full of the discovery he had made, and there was no room in his brain for anything else.

That he was Robert Digby's heir he had no doubt.

The evidence was complete in every detail. At last he knew who he was. The secret of his birth and childhood lay open before him. But with that knowledge came a number of questions for which he could find no answer. The clearing up of one mystery created a number of fresh ones.

The maid came and cleared away the table at length, and, dropping into his easy-chair, he filled his pipe and contemplated the fire with a puzzled, and, at times, a startled look in his eyes. He wanted to sort out his emotions and systematise the questions that hammered at his brain, but he felt powerless to do so. Before he could fix his mind on the elucidation of one question, another question forced its way into his brain and demanded an answer.

Under the soothing influence of his pipe, however, a dim sort of cosmos began to shape itself out of his mental chaos. Questions began to resolve themselves into some sort of order and sequence ; but to find an answer to many of the questions seemed to him an impossible task.

His emotions were mixed, and just then undeterminable. He was glad to know who he was, but not at all glad to discover that he was Bob Digby's heir. He was not superstitious, nor particularly nervous ; and yet a vague horror crept over him as he recalled the old man's prediction. To be cursed by Digby's gold was a fate that he was not at all anxious to achieve.

Nor was that all. Mary Maxwell was at present in possession—a woman whom he admired more than any other woman he had ever seen ; a woman who was using the money in the noblest possible way, and turning old Digby's curse into a benediction. Was he anxious to usurp her place ; to elbow her out of the



position of splendid usefulness she held ; to put a sudden end to her career of philanthropy ?

He had to confess that he was not anxious to do anything of the sort. And yet he was human. The idea of riches was full of fascination. To be lifted above the necessity of labour, to get beyond the caprice of employers, to pursue without let or hindrance one's own whim or will or way, to find scope for the exercise of one's best gifts, and opportunity for the exercise of charity—surely that was a state of existence that might be called ideal ?

But clouds began to appear in the sky after a while, and the brilliant colours grew sombre. In his scheme of life others were bound to have a place. Where did Sophy Wilks come in, and what sort of figure would she cut in this new and exalted position ? Would Sophy rejoice over the downfall of Mary Maxwell, and insist on reversing the unselfish policy she had inaugurated ? Would Sophy turn up her nose at the schoolmistress's daughter and patronise her from her exalted position ?

He succeeded in dismissing the subject after a while, for more pressing questions were clamouring for an answer, and the most obtrusive and clamorous question of all was : How and by what means and for what purpose had he been spirited away to America, and why, when spirited away, was he deserted in the early hours of a summer morning in the City of St. Louis.

Assuming that he was the son of Harry Digby—and on that point he had no doubt whatever—there must be a reason, and a very conclusive reason, somewhere why he had been subjected to such strange and inhuman treatment. He had not got to America by chance. He had not been blown there by an

easterly gale. And there were no magic carpets in those modern days to transport people across seas and continents in the twinkling of an eye.

It was clear that he had been deliberately and cleverly kidnapped and carried off to America for a very definite purpose. But what was the purpose, and who had done the deed ?

Naturally he thought of the reversion of Bob Digby's property. If he were out of the way the other heir would take possession. Wittingly or unwittingly, the deed was done in Mary Maxwell's interest, or in the interest of somebody who would benefit or hope to benefit by her good fortune.

Who would be likely to benefit ? There were only two persons—her mother and the man who expected to marry her. He dismissed Mrs. Maxwell from his mind at once. To a woman so constituted the thing would be impossible. Besides, as he had heard more than once, she was ill in bed at the time, and had been for several weeks. So by a very simple process of elimination he reached the same conclusion that Albert Wilks had arrived at months previously, but he reached it much more quickly than Wilks did.

He recalled the words of Tom Verney only a night or two previously—

“ He has waited for her more than twenty years, and he deserves her.”

“ Waited, has he ? ” he said to himself, while a frown gathered on his frank, pleasant face. “ He has not only waited, but he has worked and plotted and—and lied.”

Tom Verney dropped in while he was in the midst of these reflections. He was not particularly pleased at being disturbed, but he made the best of it.

"Going out to-night, Lostun?" Verney inquired, in his genial, off-hand fashion.

"No; I think not," was the answer. "The truth is, I'm rather tired. Won't you sit down?"

"Don't mind if I do. I ought to do some reading to-night; but for some reason I'm not a bit in the humour."

And Verney dropped into a chair and began to fill his pipe.

"Any further news from Longhampton?" Lostun questioned at length indifferently.

"You mean about old Digby's heir?"

"Yes."

"Well, from what I can find out there's been what Mrs. Fardell calls an 'itch.'"

"Oh!"

"The Pater's been up again this afternoon. I've never known him so excited over anything. You see, he was in at the birth of the heir, vaccinated the kid, and all that, and he's dying with curiosity to see the young fellow for himself."

"Well?"

"The man can't be found. When I told you the other night that he had been told who he was and all that, it seems I went beyond the facts. He cleared out of the hospital without giving his name, and without giving anyone a chance of telling him of the discovery that had been made."

"Oh, I see. Then it's probable he's still in ignorance of his good fortune."

"Likely as not he is; but he's bound to find out all about it sooner or later. I expect the story will be in all the London papers on Monday."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because the *Longhampton Post* is full of it to-day.

Of course, the story is a good deal exaggerated. But the Pater, who has interviewed the surgeons at 'The County,' is quite of opinion that the young fellow is Harry Digby's son."

"But suppose this young fellow never reads the papers, or suppose he should fail to recognise himself in the descriptions given—for that is quite conceivable—what would happen then?"

"That's more than I can say. The Pater is of opinion that whether he makes himself known or remains in the dark, things can never be exactly as they were."

"Why not?"

"Well, to begin with, Mary Maxwell is not the kind of woman to stick to property if she has any doubt as to its being hers."

"But if the heir never turns up?"

"She will keep expecting him. She will be on the *qui vive* all the time——"

"But what about her legal adviser and future husband?"

"He may, of course, succeed in persuading her to hold on, but I doubt it. I feel sorry for Smart. He's a good fellow in spite of his pietism, and he's done an awful lot for the girl, and waited half a lifetime for her, and he's deserving of some compensation."

"But isn't Miss Maxwell herself sufficient compensation, apart from the gilding?"

"Well, yes, under ordinary circumstances. There can be no doubt she is a splendid girl. Still, when a fellow has been reckoning on a fortune as well, it's rather rough to be cheated out of it."

"Smart, I believe, bears a good reputation in the town?"

"Excellent, I should say, in the main. Of course,

a great many people don't like him, but that's the case with everybody."

"Has he a large practice?"

"Well, as to that I am unable to speak. Some people say he has sacrificed his own interests in looking after old Digby's estate. Others, of course, say he is not the man to do anything for nothing."

"Well, if you hear anything fresh, let me know," Lostun said, with an uneasy laugh. "I confess I am getting interested in the story."

"I will," Verney answered, relighting his pipe; and then the conversation drifted away to other subjects.

Lostun scarcely slept at all that night. Constantly some fresh view of the case kept presenting itself to him, and no sooner had he decided on some particular course of action than a different and possibly a better course suggested itself.

By morning Lostun had come to the conclusion not to declare himself—for a few days, at any rate. He would be a little more certain of his ground before he moved. If he struck at all, he would like to do it effectively. It would not be enough to establish his own claims, he would want to expose the wickedness and treachery that had kept him out of his rights so long.

Soon after breakfast he looked up a time-table, and discovered that there was a train to Longhampton in half an hour. He was not fond of Sunday travelling or Sunday work of any kind, but he felt that in the present instance he was justified in taking the journey.

He reached Euston in good time, and took a seat in a corner of a third-class carriage. A minute or two before the train started he was surprised to see Dr.

Wilks hurrying along the platform. Instinctively he put his head out of the window, and was in time to see Dr. Wilks pull open the door of a first-class compartment, and disappear within.

"Has some patient in the country, I suppose," Lostun reflected, as he settled himself once more in his corner.

The train stopped at a good many stations, as Sunday trains usually do, and at each stopping-place Lostun put his head out of the window, expecting to see his prospective father-in-law alight. It was clear, however, that Dr. Wilks was taking a fairly lengthy journey.

At length the train pulled up at Longhampton, and Lostun peered cautiously out. He hardly knew why he did so. Had Dr. Wilks alighted at any other station he would have spoken to him. Now, he was resolved to keep himself in the background. He followed Dr. Wilks out of the station at a safe distance, but was careful not to lose sight of him.

Dr. Wilks never once looked behind him, and as the streets were comparatively empty, Lostun had no difficulty in tracking him down. The business part of the town was avoided. Gardens began to appear in front of the houses. They were approaching a residential suburb.

Dr. Wilks swung himself along at the same jaunty pace, then paused suddenly in front of a wooden gate, looked up at the windows of the house for a moment, then pushed open the gate and entered.

Lostun approached the house slowly and cautiously. For some unaccountable reason he had become not only curious, but suspicious. A sprinkle of rain came, not enough to wet the pavements, but Lostun at once opened his umbrella, and kept it low over his head.

He reached the gate and paused just a moment. On the gate was a brass plate—

MR. DAVID SMART,  
Solicitor,  
Commissioner for Oaths.

Lostun caught his breath for a second, then hurried rapidly away. At the next crossing he turned to the left, then doubled back again into the business part of the town.

For the most part he walked aimlessly. He had no clear idea in his mind what he intended doing. He pulled up at length in front of a commercial hotel and entered. Being Sunday, it was almost deserted, but he rightly surmised that there would be a few men who had been unable to get home on the previous day.

He sat down at the ordinary, which had just been brought on, without a word. They were only five all told, and for a while very little was said.

Somebody inquired of Lostun at length his line, and he answered "electric fittings," and mentioned the firm of Cleveland, Glover & Co. This seemed to remove the shadow of reticence that hung over the little company, and conversation became general.

The senior at the head of the table had known Longhampton for thirty years. Knew its history, both public and secret. Knew all the men who had prospered, and all who had failed. Knew its aldermen, its councillors, its doctors, solicitors, and parsons. In fact, anything connected with Longhampton that Sam Mason did not know was not worth knowing.

Lostun decided that he would cultivate Mason's acquaintance. Mason appeared nothing loath, and the two found themselves at length in the smoke-room alone. Lostun was thirsting for information, especi-

ally on some points of English law. Mason was quite ready and willing to oblige the young stranger.

From law the conversation slid easily into a talk about lawyers—lawyers in general, and then to lawyers in particular.

“Brown & Lewis are the best men in this town,” Mr. Mason said, with conviction.

“What about Mr. Smart?” Lostun inquired. “His name has been mentioned to me.”

Mr. Mason’s face took on a thoughtful expression.

“I’ve nothing to say against him,” he said cautiously, “but I’ve had no experience of his abilities.”

“But you have employed Messrs. Brown & Lewis?” Lostun questioned.

“Oh no, not I!” and Mason laughed. “I always avoid lawyers whenever possible.”

“Then you speak only from hearsay?” Lostun suggested.

“I won’t say only. Oh no! I have not studied men for thirty years for nothing. Character reveals itself in many ways. Some men you trust instinctively.”

“And you don’t trust David Smart?”

“I did not say so. Young man, don’t jump to too hasty conclusions.”

Lostun laughed, and Mason looked pleased with himself.

“Smart is likely to be a good deal in the public eye during the next few weeks,” Mason went on at length.

“Indeed!”

“You’ve heard the story of old Digby’s will, I expect?”

“I read it in yesterday’s *Post*.”

“Well, if it be true that Digby’s heir has turned up alive, there’s a good deal that has to be found out.”



"And you think Smart is the man who will help the public to discover it?"

Mason looked at him knowingly.

"Young man," he said, "what is at the back of your mind that induced you to put that question?"

"Curiosity, I expect," he answered frankly. "I got greatly interested in the story yesterday."

"Well, that's natural," Mason said, after a pause. "I am interested myself. I knew Harry Digby slightly—a clever fellow, but reckless. I've seen his wife—as sweet a soul as ever breathed. The kid I don't remember ever seeing. How did that kid get lost? Was it accident or design? If design, for what purpose? Was there a long look ahead, or——" Then he paused.

"You ought to have been an attorney," Lostun said, with a laugh.

"I believe I would have succeeded at the Bar," Mason said, with becoming modesty, "but I never had the chance. My parents were too poor."

"Suppose, for the sake of the fun of it," Lostun said, with a laugh, "we imagine ourselves two detectives or two lawyers, and we set ourselves to riddle out from the data at hand some theory of the child's disappearance."

"Happy thought," said Mason, laughing. "You have the first try, and then I'll come in and upset it, or improve upon it, or invent something entirely new."

"Agreed!" and Lostun droned out a clumsy and impossible theory which took no account of David Smart at all.

Mason's eyes twinkled and his lips twitched.

"It won't do at all," he said, when Lostun had

finished. "You'd never make a novelist, I can see. What is wanted is a vivid imagination under the control of reason. Now, listen to this——"

And Lostun refilled his pipe, edged himself farther into his chair, and gave all attention.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### NEARING THE TRUTH

JOHN LOSTUN shook his head when Mr. Mason had finished expounding his theory.

"It won't do," he said. "Gipsies don't do such things. Besides, where is the motive?"

"I admit it has its weak places," Mason conceded, with a laugh, "but it is a better theory than yours."

"I don't think so," Lostun retorted. "Especially in face of the rumour that the young man in question has lived nearly all his life in America."

"In America?"

"So I've heard it said. And if the rumour be true, how did he get across the Atlantic? Do you know anyone from these parts who emigrated to America twenty odd years ago?"

Mason gave a sudden start when the question was put to him, and half rose from his chair. Then he sat back again and shut his eyes tightly. Lostun watched him with interest that amounted almost to anxiety. He had come to Longhampton with the express object of getting information on this point, and to get what he wanted from the first man he met would be a stroke of luck almost too good to hope for.

"Well, I did know some people who went to

America about the time you name," Mason said at length, speaking slowly and deliberately. "I knew them pretty well too, but they weren't from these parts, and they had no connection with these parts; that is——" Then he stopped abruptly.

"Well?" Lostun questioned.

"Oh, nothing. David Smart had a sister who married a farmer down in Cheshire, and they went to America about that time. That's all."

"Why did they go to America?"

"Couldn't make the farm pay, I reckon—and then Amos Chadwick was a gayish customer and not over fond of work."

"And have they remained in America?"

"I believe so. Oh yes; if they had returned I should have heard of it;" and Mr. Mason rose from his chair with the air of a man who wished to discontinue the conversation.

Lostun rose also, and, after exchanging a few commonplaces about the weather, they both went into the street and turned their faces in different directions.

"Now, why did he grow suddenly reticent?" Lostun said to himself as he made his way aimlessly along the street, "and why should my question startle him, as it evidently did?"

For half an hour he walked up one street and down another, buried in thought. The theory that was vague and blurred began to take clear and definite shape. He saw, or fancied he saw, the hand of David Smart in all that had happened, and yet he was loath to associate a man so generally respected with a plot so despicable and cold-blooded.

He paused at length before a plain brick building,

arrested mainly by a large placard hung across the door :

"THE UNADULTERATED GOSPEL  
WILL BE PREACHED IN  
THIS TEMPLE  
AT 6.30 THIS EVENING BY  
MR. DAVID SMART.  
ALL ARE WELCOME.  
COLLECTION."

Lostun read the announcement several times, then turned away, saying to himself, " No ; it cannot be. Such a man would never stoop to anything so mean. I must be surely on the wrong tack."

He turned into a temperance hotel, and ordered tea, and was soon in conversation with a grey-bearded old gentleman who evidently knew as much about Longhampton as Samuel Mason did—possibly more. The old man was a native of Longhampton, and was proud of his citizenship. Like Mason, he was fond of talking, especially when he had an appreciative listener.

He knew all about David Smart ; remembered him when he first came to Longhampton. Had watched his steady rise to influence and position, and greatly admired him for his zeal and humility.

Lostun turned the conversation in the direction he desired by interrogating a question now and then, and by the time tea was over he knew David's public life from start to finish.

The old man jumped up at length with a start.

" I shall be late for service if I don't make haste," he said. " I didn't know we'd been so long over tea."

" You're going to church ? " Lostun questioned, with a smile.

" No ; I worship in the Temple," was the reply.

"Would you not like to hear Mr. Smart administer the Word?"

"I should very much," Lostun answered, "but I fear I cannot avail myself of that pleasure to-night."

"Ah, that's a pity," was the answer. "I walk three miles here and three miles back every Sabbath, and I'm well repaid."

After the old man had gone Lostun consulted a time-table, and discovered that there was no train back to town until after eight o'clock.

On the whole, he was quite satisfied with his day's work. He had picked up practically all the information he needed. How far it would be of any value remained to be seen.

The congregation in the Temple was singing heartily and cheerfully as he passed. For a moment he paused outside the door; then he took off his hat and entered. The building appeared to be quite full, and he had some difficulty in finding a seat. The hymn was a long one, with a refrain at the end of every verse.

When the last strains died away David Smart rose from his chair on the platform, and, standing before a narrow reading-desk, raised his right hand. Instantly every head was bowed in prayer.

A deep hush fell upon the assembly, and after a few moments of almost breathless stillness the preacher began. His voice was low and tremulous. He spoke like one labouring under some deep emotion. Lostun was moved unconsciously. He had never listened to a prayer like it before. The voice was tender, pleading, with now and then the sound of tears in it. There was no ranting, no shouting, not the slightest trace of irreverence, and long before the Amen was reached eyes were moist all over the building.

A couple of hymns followed, with the reading of Scriptures between, and then David rose to preach. Lostun settled himself in his corner behind a pillar and watched him closely.

His subject was Abraham's faith being accounted to him for righteousness. It was in many ways a wonderful deliverance. Passion, pathos, declamation were skilfully blended. Of its effect upon the congregation there could be no doubt. Men who had failed and fallen were bidden to rejoice. No one could be righteous according to the law. No one ever had been save One, and He was Divine, and His righteousness was imputed to those who believed in Him. Everybody was sinful. Everybody did wrong continually. The law was too hard for human nature to endure. So their case was met by One who kept the law for them. They had not to do, but to believe. They could not be saved by works, but if they had faith it would be accounted to them for righteousness.

As the preacher warmed with his theme his face became radiant, his eyes shone like stars, his voice thrilled with emotion. He claimed to be no better than the rest. He had no merit of his own. Judged by the standard of the law, they were all past praying for. No one could cast a stone at his neighbour ; no one was a saint by merit of the life he lived.

He told the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, of Saul and David and Solomon. He dwelt upon their defects : the intrigues and falsehoods of some, the cruelties of others. But they were men of faith, and that was all-sufficient. And what was true of the saints of old was true of the saints of the present day. Their merit was not their own ; it was an imputed merit. The Almighty did not look at them, but at their repre-

sentative ; their guilt and uncleanness were hidden away under the robe of His righteousness.

Lostun listened in wonder and amazement. He had never heard any preaching like it before. He did not wonder that the faces of the congregation shone as they craned their necks to listen. Why should these people trouble about the sins of yesterday or to-day, or the sins they might and probably would commit to-morrow ? They had only to believe in One who had kept the law for them, and a sponge was passed over the slate, and their sin no longer existed. It was easier than the Confessional, casier than purchasing indulgences with money.

Lostun had to leave before the service was over in order to catch his train. At the station he kept in shadow as much as possible, and kept a careful lookout for Dr. Wilks.

That gentleman, however, had returned by a much earlier train. His interview with David Smart was not of such a pleasant character that he was anxious to prolong it. He had come in response to an urgent telegram he had received from David on the previous evening.

David was waiting to receive him, having cut the morning service short at the Temple.

" Sit down," was the lawyer's greeting, " and read that ; " and he handed him a copy of the *Longhampton Post*.

Wilks adjusted his pince-nez with deliberation and apparent unconcern. He feared there was trouble in the wind, and had prepared himself to meet it without any outward sign of distress. He read the article through without as much as a twitching of the eyelids, and when he had finished he folded the paper carefully and laid it across his knee.



The lawyer watched him narrowly, with a scowl upon his face.

"Well?" he questioned at length.

"Well?" was the reply.

"You see your game is up at last?"

"And yours also."

"But I warned you against this. I saw the possibility of it, and I relied on you to prevent such an accident."

"I can't do impossibilities."

"You can do nothing except levy blackmail. What's your next move to be?"

"I don't know. Depends on what you do."

"Have you seen the young man lately?"

"Yes; saw him on Friday."

"And he told you of the discovery he had made, or which had been made for him?"

"No; he did not allude to the matter."

"But he must have known. You see all that account," pointing to the paper, "is vouched for by responsible medical men."

"I very much question if he does know," Wilks said stoutly.

"At any rate he'll know to-morrow, if he doesn't to-day, because such a story is too piquant to be kept out of the papers. If he's alive to-morrow morning he'll know all about it;" and he looked hardly and knowingly at Wilks.

"We must take our chance. But a good deal may happen between now and to-morrow morning."

"You know where to find him?"

"Of course I do."

"And you think he needs medical treatment?"

"I think you will need medical treatment if you are

not careful how you speak ; " and Dr. Wilks clenched his hands angrily.

" You are growing mightily sensitive in these days," David said insinuatingly.

" And you are growing mightily offensive," Wilks retorted, growing very red about the ears. " You need not put everything you think or desire into plain speech."

" Surely we understand each other," David said mildly, " and no one can hear us."

" That may be true, but some things had better not be said, anyhow."

" But some things must be said," David retorted. " It is neck or nothing with both of us. Your secret is no longer of any value, for all the country now knows that he's alive. By to-morrow, if he is alive, he will know the truth. Everything hinges on that ' if.' "

For a few moments Dr. Wilks remained silent. Then he rose slowly to his feet.

" If I am to act," he said, " I must have money."

" How much do you want ? "

" I ought to have fifty pounds at least."

" You shall have it if you will promise——"

" I will promise nothing," Wilks said defiantly.

David hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly out of the room. In a few minutes he was back again with a roll of banknotes.

" If you fail," he said impressively, " this is the last money you will get from me."

Dr. Wilks did not reply, but carefully deposited the notes in his breast-pocket.

On reaching town he made his way direct to Bloomsbury. He was anxious to know how Lostun fared. Much might have happened during the previous day. He looked up to the windows when he reached the

house, and noticed with a little gasp that none of the blinds were drawn. Had he forgotten to take the tabloids as he had forgotten to take the mixture ?

" Is Mr. Lostun at home ? " he inquired anxiously of the maid who opened the door.

" No, sir ; he's gone out."

" Gone out ? "

" Yes, sir. He went out this morning, and don't expect to be home till late."

Dr. Wilks looked at his patent leather boots for a moment. He was puzzled, not to say disappointed.

" Is—is he better, do you know ? " he asked, looking up suddenly. " He was not at all well a few days ago."

" Oh, he's all right again," the girl answered sharply. " Who shall I say has called ? "

" The doctor ; that will be sufficient," and Dr. Wilks turned and walked away.

An hour later he turned the handle of his own door at Tottenham and entered. Sophy was alone in the little drawing-room, intent on a novel. She looked up indifferently when her father entered, and then went on reading.

" Has Lostun been here to-day ? " he questioned.

" No."

" You haven't seen him ? "

" How am I to see him if he isn't here to be seen ? "

" You may have met him in town."

" Well, I haven't."

" Do you know where he is ? "

" No, I don't ; and I don't care."

" You are sweet-tempered this evening, I must confess."

" So would you be if you'd been in the house all day without seeing a soul."

" When do you expect him again ? "

“ Any time.”

Dr. Wilks retired to the dining-room and lighted a cigar. He had fifty pounds in his pocket, but he felt excessively miserable. He had practically got to the end of his tether, and he did not know how soon his game might be exposed. Nothing had worked out as he had anticipated. In trying to trap others he had been trapped himself. His secret was a secret no longer. His pillar of gold was dissolving in smoke.

Nor was that all ; he had acted in a way that might waken suspicion. Suppose John Lostun by any chance should have his eyes opened ! Suppose any fresh turn of events should set him thinking !

Dr. Wilks became so anxious that he let his cigar go out and forgot to light it again.

## CHAPTER XXV

### LOSTUN FINDS A CLUE

JOHN LOSTUN had so much food for reflection on his journey home that the time passed like a dream.

On reaching his lodgings he was informed that his doctor had called, and seemed very much surprised to find he was out.

"Did he leave any message?" Lostun inquired, with pretended indifference.

"No, but he inquired partickler if you were better."

"Thanks;" and Lostun closed the door and wheeled up his chair before the fire. His face wore a very troubled look. Could it be possible that Dr. Wilks was a partner in this conspiracy?

He had been asking himself all the way home what connection there was between David Smart and Dr. Wilks, and what was the particular business that took Dr. Wilks to see the lawyer on a Sunday?

For an hour he stood staring into the fire, turning the subject round and round in his mind, but he could discover no clue to the problem anywhere. Then suddenly a thought flashed through his mind that made him jump. For a moment he tried to banish it. It was too painful, too humiliating to contemplate; but it would come back in spite of everything.

"Dr. Wilks made the same discovery at Poppleham

in the summer that the doctors made in the County Hospital."

From that starting-point he was bound to go on. There was no turning back. He felt like a man who had found the key to a puzzle. What five minutes before had been wrapped in mystery was now plain and simple and straightforward.

It was a humiliating picture that opened up before him: a picture of meanness and duplicity and pharisaism. He felt for a moment that he would rather be cheated out of his fortune than have his faith in people whom he had trusted so completely destroyed.

His mind worked unconsciously without effort or volition on his part. He seemed to be carried from point to point almost against his will. He saw the whole panorama of intrigue sketched out before him.

How easily he had been duped. How cleverly he had been led on from stage to stage.

He felt more angry with himself than he did with either Smart or Wilks or Sophy. No man likes to discover that he has been made a fool of; and that Wilks and Sophy had fooled him up hill and down dale there could be no doubt whatever.

So impressed was he with the part they had played, that David Smart was for the moment driven out of his mind. In imagination he was back again in Poppleham.

Now he saw everything as in a flash. Sophy had never cared for him. He had had a feeling of that kind from the first. The note of genuine devotion had always been absent from her speech. Yet she had lured him on from step to step with an easy skill that he had not been able to resist.

He had never made love to her, and yet how cleverly

she had entangled him. The gossips had talked. She was being compromised in the eyes of her neighbours. She had believed that his coming to see her so often could mean only one thing.

It was all a blind, a clever bit of strategy. She knew he was heir to Digby's property, and she was determined to bring him up to the point of offering marriage to her before he knew who he was.

Meanwhile, her father was blackmailing David Smart. He could not blackmail Mary Maxwell, for she did not want the property, but David was of different calibre. He evidently believed in making the best of both worlds, and as he was to marry Mary, he would naturally be anxious to keep the true heir in the dark, or get rid of him in some effective manner.

"Get rid of him!" He repeated the words to himself two or three times over, and the lines in his forehead deepened.

A fresh possibility, a fresh danger suddenly loomed before him. David Smart was too clever a man to let Dr. Wilks get the upper hand of him. He would annex him in some way; cut his claws and extract his teeth.

For a long time he puzzled over this problem, then he sprang to his feet and began to pace up and down the room.

Suppose Smart, fearing Wilks, had entered into a kind of partnership with him. Suppose Wilks had been made to see and feel that his true interests lay not in marrying his daughter to the heir, but in keeping the heir out of his rights—getting rid of him, possibly.

The perspiration oozed from Lostun's forehead and rolled down his face. The suggestion was so horrible that he tried to banish it from his mind, but it would come back. His mind had started along a different

track, and he could but go on. Memory recalled everything that had happened during the last six months, and he saw a clear and definite motive from first to last.

Wilks had been summoned to Longhampton, no doubt, on account of the story that had appeared in the Press. They were partners in the same enterprise, and that enterprise was what?

His legs trembled so that he dropped into his chair again. He felt almost ashamed of himself for allowing such suspicions to take refuge in his brain, and yet he was powerless to prevent them. He had seen Wilks that day go into the house of David Smart. Why did he go to see him? Why did he call at his lodgings on his way back? Why was he so solicitous about his health?

Lostun sprang to his feet a second time. On his dressing-room table was a bottle of medicine, and in his waistcoat pocket were some tabloids. What if—

No, he would not—he could not believe it—he told himself. He was growing morbid and uncharitable. He would go to bed and try to sleep. But sleep would not come when he got into bed. He might keep his limbs still, but he could not keep his brain still.

Sleep did come at length, but not until he had come to one or two very definite conclusions. In his own mind he tabulated them something after this fashion—

1. I was kidnapped by the agency of David Smart, and conveyed to America by his sister and brother-in-law, Amos Chadwick—and there conveniently lost. This was done that he might get more complete control over Bob Digby's property. The marrying of Mary Maxwell was a precautionary afterthought, or a counsel of safety. Who knows anything about the



estate to-day? Mary trusts him implicitly. It is always easier to fool a woman in money affairs than a man.

2. My coming to England was a mere accident. The discovery of my identity by Dr. Wilks was another accident. And the further discovery by the doctors of the County Hospital a third accident. Wilks, having discovered who I was, resolved to make capital out of it, first in his own interest and then in the interest of his daughter. In this laudable enterprise he alighted on Smart, as he was bound to do, Smart being the only one really anxious to keep me out of my rights.

3. Smart being cornered, persuades Wilks to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness—in other words, to go into partnership with him; and Wilks, caring more for himself than for Sophy, consents. Smart is to marry Miss Maxwell, and Wilks is to keep his mouth shut and share the spoil.

4. But how can Smart guarantee that Wilks will keep his mouth shut? While I'm alive his position will be a perilous one. Any day I may discover my identity, or a trifling accident may discover it for me. There's no safety for Smart until I am out of the way. Query, has Wilks tried to get me out of the way?

5. The thing Smart and Wilks both feared has happened. My identity has been discovered and published in the papers. Consequently, the conspirators are at their wits' end. There has been a hurried consultation. They are anxious to know if I know who I am. I don't wonder that during the service Smart seemed to be labouring under such deep emotion.

Having settled these points to his satisfaction, he turned over on his side and fell asleep, and when he awoke again the light of a new day was flooding the

room. Instantly his mind picked up the threads just where he dropped them ; but in the daylight he was inclined to take a less serious view of his own position, and a more charitable view of the conduct of David Smart and Dr. Wilks.

There was one thing, however, that troubled him a good deal, and that was the fate of Mary Maxwell. Unless something were done, and done quickly, she would find herself tied to David Smart for life. That she trusted him absolutely there could be no doubt. She spoke of him as her best friend. Whether she loved him in any true sense of the word or not he did not know. Possibly she did. Women often wasted their affection on the least worthy objects. But whether she loved him or not, there could be no doubt he had got her consent to marry him.

And if she married him, he—John Lostun—would feel his hands tied. It might be fun to hunt down David Smart, the lawyer, and expose his villainy, but it would be another thing to hunt down the husband of Mary Maxwell.

Of all the women in the world, she in his eyes was fairest and best. He did not pretend that he loved her even to himself. How could he, when he was engaged to another, and Mary was the promised wife of David Smart ? But he did admire her, and he made no secret of it. She answered to his ideal as no other woman had ever done. Had they met a year or two earlier the world might have been a different place for him, but it was of no use crying over what could not be helped. The question now was, could he prevent her marrying David Smart, and if so, ought he to do so ?

He puzzled over this question all the way to London Wall, and for some time after he got into his office,

Then the principal, Mr. Glover, sent for him, and the subject passed clean out of his mind.

Mr. Glover was intent on some rough pencil drawings which he passed over to Lostun, together with a long typewritten letter.

"I don't know whether I'm specially addle-headed to-day, or what it is," Mr. Glover said, with a laugh ; "but I confess I can make neither head nor tail of it. Will you see what you can make of it ?"

Lostun read the letter through very carefully ; then he looked at the drawings. Then he read through the letter again, then turned to the drawings a second time.

"Well ?" Mr. Glover questioned at length.

"I don't quite see it," Lostun said, without looking up.

"You know it is the very thing we worried over some five or six months ago ?"

"Yes, I know ; and from what Mr. Cleveland says the difficulty has been got over, and the thing is in full working order in several places. I confess I should like to see it, for I can't see how it is done from this."

"Neither can I," Mr. Glover answered, scratching his head. "I've been worrying over it ever since I got down to the office. But either those drawings are wrong, or Cleveland is mistaken. It seems to me he hasn't quite grasped the difficulty."

"The letter seems to indicate that all we want has been accomplished, but the drawings certainly don't show how it is done."

"I wish you could run across and see the thing yourself," Mr. Glover said, after a pause. "It would be worth a thousand letters."

Lostun looked up with a start.

"There is nothing in your department, is there, that

Rundle could not do ? ” Mr. Glover went on, glancing at Lostun from under his shaggy eyebrows.

“ We have certainly nothing that is very exacting on the stocks at present,” Lostun said absently.

“ I would like to go myself,” Mr. Glover said, “ but it is impossible for me to get away at present. Would you mind taking the trip ? There are several new things they have in the shops on the other side that I want particulars of.”

“ I’ll go with pleasure,” Lostun answered. “ When would you like me to start ? ”

“ The sooner the better. You see, we’re rather slack just now, but in a month’s time we may be up to our eyes in work. So you’d better start to-morrow if you can get a berth.”

“ I’ll run round to the shipping offices at once ; ” and without any more words, he walked out of the office.

In half an hour he was back again.

“ Well ? ” Mr. Glover questioned, looking up from his desk.

“ I sail from Southampton to-morrow afternoon.”

“ That’s good. I’ll make out a list of the things I want you particularly to look into.”

Lostun hurried back to his own office and set to work at once. Three or four weeks’ absence meant seeing to a number of things that might have stood over for several days. Half an hour for lunch was all he allowed himself, and he kept Rundle as hard at work as himself.

He had no time to think of David Smart or Albert Wilks, no time to worry himself over Sophy or Mary Maxwell. American methods were all based on the principle of the greatest economy in the largest number of ways, and Lostun was American bred if English born.

It was late when he got back to his lodgings that night. He had got all his packing to do, and he quite anticipated he would have a number of purchases to make in the morning. He moved about very leisurely, however, and took full time over his dinner.

Away from the office and the stress of business, his thoughts had an opportunity of running again into other channels. Under other circumstances he would have made an effort to see Sophy, if only for five minutes, but he felt to-night as if he never wanted to see her again.

When they did meet he knew the truth would have to come out. He hated everything that was underhanded, and Sophy would have to answer a good many questions before any kind of intimacy could be restored.

He hardly knew whether to be pleased or otherwise at having to go to America at so short a notice. For some things he knew he was sorry. He had just come into possession of a secret that meant more to him than he knew, and he was anxious to unravel the whole network of mystery and intrigue and crime. He was sorry also for Mary Maxwell's sake. He was very much afraid that Smart would take advantage of his absence and silence to hurry on the wedding, and get the control of the Digby property more completely into his own hands.

On the other hand, he would be glad to get out of the reach of the conspirators for a little space. He would have time to think, time to shape his plans for the future. At the present time his brain was in a whirl, his nerves all unstrung. And a week's quiet on the broad sea, where no letters or newspapers could reach him, might be the very best thing that could happen.

Things had often a happy knack of righting themselves without human intervention. It might be so in this case. The moral order was ever operative ; nothing stood still. Right and wrong were working out their inevitable consequences. In the long run it was well with the righteous ; in the long run it was ill with the wicked.

A knock came to the door while these thoughts were passing through his mind, and a moment later Tom Verney sauntered leisurely into his room.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### VISITORS

“**B**USY?” Verney questioned nonchalantly.  
“Rather! I am starting for New York to-morrow.”

“For New York, eh? Then I won’t detain you.”

“Sit down, man, and smoke your pipe out. It won’t take me long to pack my bags when I start.”

“If I were going to America I should want at least a week to prepare,” Verney said, with a laugh.

“A great mistake! As a rule, the more time one has to prepare, the more flustered he is at the end. Besides, what is a journey to New York in these days?”

“Can’t say. I’ve never been. Where do you sail from?”

“Southampton. But what news do you bring about the long-lost heir?”

“Nothing fresh. By all accounts he has not put in an appearance yet.”

“Still ignorant of his good fortune, eh?”

“Possibly so; but he can’t remain in ignorance much longer.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is in all the London papers to-day.

He's bound to see it if he reads the papers at all. Besides, everybody is talking about it."

"But he may never think of applying the description to himself."

"I don't see how he can help it."

"Why not?"

"Well, suppose last Monday you were knocked down in the street by a bus or cab, and were taken, unconscious, into the County Hospital, that you remained there several hours, and then, in spite of the nurse, got up and left; and suppose, a week later, you read in the papers all this set out in detail, with the further announcement that the surgeons who examined you found certain marks or peculiarities, also set out in detail, which coincided in every particular with those known to be the peculiar, or, shall I say exclusive, possession of Robert Digby's missing heir—don't you think you would say to yourself, 'Good heavens! I was knocked down last Monday, I was taken to the County Hospital, I left the same evening in spite of the nurse, and I have some of those marks described'?"

"Well, yes, I expect I should," Lostun said, with a smile.

"Of course you would. And unless the young fellow has got killed in the meanwhile, he's bound to declare himself within the next day or two."

"He'll not get killed, I suppose, if he does declare himself?" Lostun questioned, with a laugh.

"Not he! Who's to kill him? Mary Maxwell will be only too thankful to escape the burden of old Digby's money."

"And will the lawyer be as eager to marry her then, think you?"

"Oh, I fancy so. Of course, there are people who say he cares only for her money, but there are always



people who say uncharitable things about everybody."

"That is true. Are they to be married soon, do you know?"

"It is rumoured that the wedding is to take place some time during the present month."

"So soon?" and he gave a little gasp, which, however, Verney did not notice.

Verney knocked the ashes out of his pipe and rose to his feet.

"By the bye," Lostun said, "you are a doctor——"

"Not quite," Verney answered, with a laugh.

"And something of a chemist?"

"Well?"

"I want to find out the constituents of certain substances I have in my possession."

"I can get them analysed for you."

"If you would I should be obliged. There's no hurry, of course, as I may not be back for a month."

And he went off into his room, and in a few minutes returned with the bottle of mixture and the tabloids.

"Looks like a bottle of medicine," Verney said, holding it up to the light and laughing.

"Or furniture polish," Lostun suggested.

Verney pulled out the cork and sniffed at the contents of the bottle.

"Haven't been contemplating suicide, have you?" and he laughed again.

"Not much. I'm rather too fond of life."

"Well, I hope you'll have a pleasant trip and a safe return;" and the next moment he had left the room.

Lostun got out his writing-desk and opened it on the table. He would have to write a note to Sophy

and explain his long absence. What should he say to her ?

A moment's reflection decided him to say nothing that would waken her suspicions. During the next month events would have to shape themselves without any interference on his part.

Fortunately for him, he had never been in the habit of putting love passages on paper. His letters to Sophy had always been brief and business-like. This would have to be like its predecessors, even though he was going away.

"MY DEAR SOPHY," he wrote,— "I should have come to see you this evening but for pressure of business. I had to be at the office until quite late, and now I have to pack my bags for a trip abroad to-morrow. I expect to be out of England for several weeks, so don't worry if you don't hear from me, as I shall have few opportunities for writing. Take care of yourself during my absence. I shall have a lot to talk about when I see you. You will understand that I have a hundred-and-one things to see to this evening, and so have no time for a long letter.—Yours, as ever,  
JACK."

Having folded the letter and addressed it, he went out and posted it. Coming back into his room he sat down to his desk again. He had made up his mind to write to Dr. Wilks and post it some time during the next day. His letter would no doubt be more or less in the nature of pulling a bow at a venture, but he was so hedged in by mystery that he was convinced that only by some such method would he be able to arrive at the truth.

That he was suspicious of the part Wilks had played

he could no longer deny. He had done his best to think charitably, but the more he had exercised his brain the more odious Wilks and Smart appeared in his eyes. He never had cared much for the doctor. He hardly knew why. Even in the old Poppleham days, when his feeling of gratitude was at its highest, he was conscious of an emotion that was distinctly antipathetic.

But his latent mistrust had now leaped into a scorching flame. He feared that there was no villainy to which Wilks would not stoop if he could make money by it. Anyhow, if Dr. Wilks had meant to poison him he should get a polite hint that his trick was on the point of being discovered. •

It was no easy matter to write a letter that should convey just a hint and no more. He was not skilled in the use of words, though he was fairly sensitive to their finer shades of meaning. Before he had even moderately satisfied himself he had destroyed half a dozen sheets of notepaper. This is what he wrote in the end—

“DEAR DR. WILKS,—It was most unfortunate that I should have been out when you called yesterday afternoon, particularly as I am going abroad to-morrow—Tuesday—on business, and shall not have another opportunity of seeing you for at least a fortnight. I can assure you I much appreciate your solicitude respecting my health; but let me set your mind at rest by assuring you that I never felt better in my life. Possibly I should have recuperated more quickly than I did after my slight indisposition if I had taken the medicine you were good enough to give me, but I was so pressed by business and other matters that I forgot all about it. However, in case

I should want a pick-me-up at some future time, I have handed over the mixture and tabloids to a friend to be analysed, and he will be able to make up a medicine for me containing the same drugs and in the same proportions.

"I have sent a line to Sophy by an earlier post explaining my absence this evening. By the time you get this I shall be on the wing.—Believe me, yours very truly,  
JOHN LOSTUN."

He read the letter two or three times over, as if not quite satisfied even yet that he had expressed himself in the best manner possible, but finally decided to let it go as it stood.

He had just commenced to put a few things into his portmanteau when a knock came to the door.

"Yes?" he called.

"Gentleman wants to see you, sir," was the answer.

"Wants to see me?" and he looked at his watch. Who could want to see him at so late an hour in the evening?

"Say I'll be down in a moment," he continued; and he closed the door of his wardrobe with a bang.

He descended the stairs slowly and meditatively. His thoughts flew instinctively to Dr. Wilks. Who else would be likely to call on him at such a late hour, and if it were he, what could be the object of his visit?

Lostun began to feel decidedly uncomfortable. How should he meet this man whom he so profoundly mistrusted? What should he say to him? As yet he had no proof of anything; and yet it was impossible to meet him on the old footing, to treat him with the

old cordiality. What then? If he treated him differently Wilks would, of course, ask for an explanation—presuming upon his relationship, he would demand it, and then the fat would be in the fire.

“I wish there was some way out of it,” Lostun muttered to himself. “I ought to have told Sarah to say I was engaged and could not come down.”

It was too late, however, to think of retreat now. He would have to face the situation and make the best of it.

He pushed open the door of his sitting-room slowly and entered, and as he did so he drew a deep breath of relief. His visitor was not Dr. Wilks. He had been playing the common rôle of meeting trouble half-way.

A young man stood at the far end of the room with his elbow on the mantelpiece. Lostun switched on a couple more lights, and noticed as he did so that his visitor was well dressed, that he had a pleasant if not a strong face, and that his manner indicated more or less of nervousness and anxiety.

“I must apologise,” the visitor began, and his voice was low and unsteady, “for calling upon you at such a late hour. I hope you won’t resent the intrusion very much.”

“Oh, not at all,” Lostun said brightly. “Won’t you sit down?” He was so much relieved at finding that Wilks was not his visitor that he was disposed to be more than usually friendly.

“Thank you. I’m afraid you will rather resent my visit,” the young man went on. “My name is Frank Harley. You may have heard Miss Wilks speak of me.”

“No, I don’t remember hearing your name before,”

Lostun answered slowly, much wondering what was in the wind.

"I thought perhaps she might have spoken of me. You see, we were great friends until you came along. I don't blame you, of course. I don't see how anybody could help falling in love with Sophy, she is so pretty and bright—that is, when she likes. And it is quite natural that you should want her. I'm not going to blame you a little bit. Only I thought you ought to know——"

"Yes?" Lostun questioned, seeing he hesitated.

"Well, you see it is this way," he went on after a pause. "The happiness of several people is at stake. Sophy has altogether a wrong notion in her head—she will grow out of it, of course, in time; but, in the meanwhile, there is a danger that she may do something foolish—something that may spoil her life and spoil the lives of other people."

"Yes; go on," Lostun said, beginning to feel interested.

"If she loved you, I wouldn't say anything. I would just bear it for her sake. I would endure anything almost to see Sophy happy. But, then, she doesn't love you. Excuse me telling you so, but I'm quite sure she doesn't. But she thinks you are well off, and that you'll be a great deal better off by and by, and just now position is the only thing she thinks about. But of course she'll get over that notion in time; but, you see, the danger is that she may get over it when it is too late."

"Well, and what do you suggest?" Lostun questioned, a curious smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

"I don't know that I have come to suggest anything exactly," Frank Harley answered in some little con-

fusion. "What I was anxious about was that you, as an honourable man, should know just how matters stood. Then you will have to act in the way you think best."

"But how am I to know that what you have told me is the truth? Am I to write Miss Wilks down as a hypocrite just because you say she is?"

"No, no, please," he said, putting up his hand. "I did not say that. Sophy is no hypocrite. She says bluntly she won't marry poverty, however much she likes a man. She's never denied that she's awfully fond of me. You ask her some day, only please don't split on me. If I'd only three hundred a year instead of a hundred and fifty and my mother to keep, Sophy and I would be the happiest people in Tottenham to-day."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Why, Sophy and I have known each other for years and years. Everybody looked upon us as lovers a year ago. The only thing that stood between us was money, or the lack of it. I hoped, of course, that she would put love before everything, and that she would be willing to wait. But something has spoiled her. She wants to be a grand lady. It isn't her real self, for Sophy is good and generous at heart; but just now the passion for money has got hold of her like a vice, and you know what the love of money will do for people."

"I'm not sure that I do."

"Oh yes, I think you must know! But, anyhow, Sophy isn't herself just now. And she is ready to marry you because she believes you are well off—or will be——"

"You are a bit rough on her, don't you think?"

"Oh, I hope not! I don't want to be. You see, I

love her as I'm sure nobody else ever can love her, and I'm quite sure she loves me better than she does anyone else. I'm not denying that she likes you very much ; but liking and loving are very different things, and if she marries you, we shall all of us be miserable."

" A melancholy picture, surely ! " Lostun said, with a laugh.

" If you believe me, it isn't a laughing matter," Harley said seriously. " I wouldn't have come all this distance if I had thought it was. You don't know what it has cost me to come. I've resolved dozens of times during the last month or two to come and see you, but my courage has always failed. I was afraid you might misunderstand me—that you would think I was mean and underhanded and selfish. I suppose I am selfish more or less ; but, believe me, it is Sophy I think about mainly. Her happiness is more to me than anything else."

" But if she has refused to marry you, that is no fault of mine. I know nothing of what you have told me. Besides, she is old enough now to know her own mind."

" I have nothing to say in reply to that," Harley answered, with downcast eyes. " I have put the facts before you. You must act now as you think best ; " and he moved toward the door.

" Such a visit as this is hardly something to be grateful for," Lostun said, with an absent look in his eyes.

" You may be grateful later," Harley replied. " Some things may be prevented which can never be cured ; " and he passed out into the hall.

Lostun followed him and opened the street door.



"I hope you will not think I'm a mere jealous meddler?" Harley said, pausing on the first step.

"I think you mean well," Lostun answered.  
So they parted.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### MISGIVINGS

ON the following day two or three things happened. In the first place, John Lostun started on his voyage to America. In the second place, Dr. Wilks received a letter, and resolved to pay another visit to David Smart, and in the third place, Mary Maxwell heard a whisper that set her thinking furiously.

The whisper originated with Samuel Mason. His conversation with Lostun in the smoke-room of the hotel will be remembered. Toward the close of that conversation Lostun asked a very simple question, which evidently perturbed his companion, and soon after he got up from his chair and they left the hotel together. Lostun turned his steps in one direction, Mason in the opposite.

Mason, as he explained to some of his friends later in the day, found his brain in a perfect whirl. He could think of only one thing, and the more he thought the more clearly one fact seemed to emerge from the darkness and confusion. If Digby's heir had been kidnapped and taken to America, then David Smart must have been the originator of the conspiracy.

During the afternoon he called on several people he knew in Longhampton, and naturally the subject was discussed in all its bearings. Mason was not a reticent man at the best of times. Some of the men on whom

he called were not ardent admirers of David Smart, hence hints and innuendoes were flung about with the greatest freedom.

When the tongues of gossip began to wag, hints quickly grew into positive statements. Before bedtime a dozen people had told as many more, and these were ready to tell twelve times that number on the following morning—that Digby's lost heir had spent nearly all his life in America ; that he had been taken thither by David Smart's sister and her husband, and abandoned in the most heartless manner ; that David Smart himself was the instigator of the whole business, and that his object was to get a firmer hold on the Digby property and in the end marry the heiress.

In the light of recent events the story had an air of probability that it could not have had at an earlier date. David's friends who heard the whisper were indignant. His enemies chuckled, and not only repeated the story, but embroidered it. Brindley, the grocer, enlarged upon the subject to every customer who came into his shop ; and even Crawley, the publican, was disposed to think there was a good deal in it.

Before Monday had run its course all the gaps in the story had been filled in. There were imaginative people in Longhampton, as in other places, and these gradually supplied what the story lacked at the beginning. Given a motive and a few facts, and all the rest was easy. The one disquieting circumstance to David Smart's enemies was the non-appearance of Harry Digby's son. That, however, was a comparatively small matter. It was not until that morning that the complete story had appeared in the London papers. The news had leaked out that the doctors in the hospital had not told him of their

discovery. Hence the chances were he was only just waking up to his real name and position.

Meanwhile, the doctors had been interviewed again, and had given more minute details than at first, details that appeared to leave no shadow of a doubt as to the identity of the young man. The excitement in Longhampton steadily increased, and the theory that David Smart had kidnapped him gained credence with surprising rapidity.

Elderly people racked their brains till their heads ached. Reporters and pressmen generally hunted up newspaper files with almost breathless eagerness. People who remembered David Smart's sister and her husband were questioned and cross-questioned as though they had been in the witness-box. In fact, business in Longhampton was seriously interrupted.

David Smart, in the seclusion of his office, was unaware of the cyclone that was sweeping round him. No one had the courage to speak to him on the subject and tell him what his neighbours were saying. It often happens that when a man's reputation has been destroyed he is the very last individual to be made aware of the fact.

On Tuesday morning Mary Maxwell went into Daveley on a shopping expedition. The story that had convulsed Longhampton during the previous twenty-four hours was beginning to agitate the surrounding villages. Had Mary received the smallest hint, she might have become conscious of the fact that the villagers regarded her with a fresh interest.

She went from shop to shop, giving her orders and chatting with the various tradesmen as was her wont, but in no case was the name of David Smart mentioned. People wondered how she would bear it

when the blow fell, wondered who the individual was who would have the courage to tell her, for they suspected that when a woman had promised to be a man's wife his reputation would be almost as dear to her as her own.

She reached the shop of the greengrocer at length—the last on her list—and waited inside the door for someone to appear. Behind a wooden partition or screen she heard voices in animated conversation.

She knocked with the handle of her umbrella on the counter, but no one appeared to hear her. The voices became louder and the tones more intense.

She was on the point of knocking again when her attention was arrested by hearing the name of David Smart. The words were spoken in a tone that was almost vehement.

"If one half the story is true David Smart is no better than a Pharisee."

"If one half the story is true he's worse," was the reply. "A man who would kidnap a child is a thief and a robber."

"But is there any proof that he did it?" asked the first speaker. "Where would be the motive?"

"He was one of Bob Digby's executors, wasn't he, and the youngest of the three? The other two were bound to drop off, and they did. With a man to deal with, things mightn't work out to his liking. But with a girl! Don't you see how he could get his own way? And if he could succeed in marrying her, why, the whole thing would drop into his hands."

Mary stood dazed at the words. But she had not heard all, for the men were still talking.

"But what proof is there that he spirited the boy off to America?" the voice went on, and Mary stood rooted to the spot.



HER ATTENTION WAS ARRESTED BY HEARING THE NAME OF DAVID  
SMART.



"How did he get there? A two-year-old baby couldn't walk across the ocean. Twenty years later he turns up again, and is discovered by a mere accident."

"But did he tell the doctors that he had spent his life in America?"

"That's what they are saying in Longhampton. The doctors twigged it first by his accent, and then he owned up."

"But that does not prove that David Smart carried him off to America—as a matter of fact, David has never been to America."

"No; but his sister and her husband went off there all of a sudden just about the time the boy disappeared, and it is said they took two children with them, though they only had one of their own."

"I can't believe it yet," said the first speaker. "David Smart is a religious man, and wouldn't stoop to anything so mean."

"Look here," said the other crossly, "it was always believed, wasn't it, that the boy was kidnapped?"

"Well?"

"There was no proof, was there, that he died, or had got killed?"

"None whatever."

"And if he were kidnapped, it was done in somebody's interest?"

"I suppose so."

"And who would profit by the boy being out of the way?"

"The girl, of course!"

"And who next?"

"Well, possibly the man who married her."

"Exactly! There you have the whole thing in a nutshell."

Mary did not wait to hear anything more. How



long she had been standing there she did not know. It had never occurred to her that she was listening to a conversation that was not meant for her ears. The story fascinated her, held her spellbound, deprived her for the moment of all volition.

When, however, there came a break in the conversation, she realised where she was, and in an agony of confusion rushed out of the place. She looked behind her once or twice, hoping that no one had seen her. She felt almost like a thief. Eavesdropping was such a reprehensible thing.

It was not until later in the day that she was able to look at the matter in its true perspective. She had heard nothing, after all, but what was common gossip, and gossip that was bound sooner or later to reach her ears.

She went to her room directly she got into the house and locked the door. She wanted to hide her agitation. She wanted also to think over what she had heard.

Almost every word of the conversation came back to her, and her clear brain leaped from point to point with almost unerring precision. However painful the process might be, she resolved to face every fact. Better know all the truth than live in constant fear of something to come out.

That the case looked black against David Smart she could not deny. She wanted to be charitable, but she was bound also to be just. Of course, the whole course of his conduct would admit of another interpretation. He might have been prompted by the noblest generosity all the way through. His one desire might have been to serve and not to profit. Either he was one of the most generous of men, or one of the most self-seeking.

But try as she would, her thoughts persisted in

taking a turn unfavourable to David's claims. Her suspicions once aroused, a hundred little things—insignificant in themselves—lent countenance to them. If it were true that the real heir was alive, and that he had been spirited away to America in comparative infancy, then the case against David Smart was overwhelming. Who else could do it? That her mother would descend to such villainy was unthinkable. Even if her mother desired such a thing, she had neither the skill nor the means.

But David was so good a man, so upright, so unselfish. What time and labour he had given to the management of the estate!

She caught her breath suddenly. What if he had been manipulating the estate to his own advantage? She had never inquired into the matter. She trusted everything to him. He brought her balance-sheets from time to time, but she did not understand business. She had not tried very much. If he were really unprincipled, then no one knew what he had done. Possibly he had been feathering his nest for years—ever since Mr. Dixon died and the entire management came into his hands.

Could that be the reason why he was so anxious to keep the true heir out of his rights, so determined to dispute his claim? Could that be the reason why he wanted to marry her directly she came into possession?

She felt herself growing cold to the very finger-tips. Her very faith in human nature appeared to be slipping from her. If she could not trust David Smart, then whom could she trust? Were there no good people in the world? Were the Pharisees of old the type of all religious people down through the centuries?

She went to her mother at length, and in a burst

of confidence told her all she had heard and all that she feared.

Mrs. Maxwell listened in indignant surprise. It was wicked of people to say such things, and almost equally wicked to listen to such calumnies.

"But people are not talking without some show of reason," Mary persisted.

"I don't agree with you, my child," Mrs. Maxwell said firmly. "The story of the lost heir turning up, is mere rumour. And as for all the rest, it is only spiteful gossip."

"It may be so," Mary said wearily. "I wish I could be as confident as you are. But I cannot be; the poison—if it be poison—has got into my blood."

"Then get it out again, Mary. Where is your loyalty to the man who is to be your husband, and who has been such a true friend to us both?"

"That is what is troubling me, mother," Mary answered, almost tearfully. "It is easy to say you must have faith—as though faith were a mere matter of the will—but doubts will come in spite of everything. A thousand little things almost terrify me, and how can I be happy with suspicion rankling in my heart?"

"You ought to be ashamed of such fears, Mary. Is a long life of spotless integrity to count for nothing?"

"If I were only sure of the spotlessness!"

"Oh, Mary—Mary! Really, such talk is quite wicked!"

"I can't help it, mother! If he comes to Winterholme to-day, I must have it out with him. If he can dissipate my doubts, so much the better;" and she turned and left the room.

During the afternoon she tried her best to think of other matters, but the old thoughts were as pertinacious as wasps. If she succeeded in driving them

away for a moment, they were back again before she was aware.

She went out for a walk at length. She felt so restless that to sit still any longer was a pain to her. She had nearly reached the lodge gates when, looking up, she espied David Smart coming rapidly to meet her.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE LAWYER GETS HIS WAY

"IT is good of you, Mary, to come to meet me," was David Smart's greeting ; and he took both her hands in his and pressed them affectionately.

"You expected I would come to-day, of course ? " he went on. "I have been counting the hours since we last met ;" and he looked round him to be sure no one was near, then bent his head and kissed her on the cheek. "Your hands are quite cold, little girl," he continued, "and your face is paler than usual. Are you not well ? "

"Oh yes, I am quite well, thank you !" she answered ; but there was no warmth of affection in her tones.

Had he been a more sensitive man he would have noticed the coldness of her greeting.

"I am going to combine business with pleasure to-day," he said jocularly. "Not my business exactly ; but business all the same. An estate like yours wants a good deal of managing."

"Yes ? " she questioned.

"I have had a good offer for some house property of yours—I don't believe in house property myself, and when there is a chance of getting rid of it on favourable terms, my advice is sell."

"Is it part of the estate ? " she questioned.

"Not originally, I believe. Mr. Digby held a mortgage on it, but the interest not being forthcoming, he foreclosed. I don't think he ever bought house property as an investment."

"And if you sold it, what would you do with the money?"

"Invest it in some gilt-edged security, my dear—something that would yield a steady income and cause you no anxiety."

"I wish I knew more about business," she said reflectively, looking at the house towards which they were slowly moving.

"Why should you wish that, Mary?" he questioned in a slight tone of surprise. "There is no need that you should worry about it at all. I might just as reasonably express regret that I did not know how to make a pudding or trim a lady's hat."

"I don't think the cases are quite parallel," she answered, without looking up. "There are some things, of course, that I don't want to know anything about. I don't want to know how to make bricks, for instance, or how to draw up wills. But in these days, when so many women are compelled to take their places in the great competitive workshop of the world, I think every girl ought to be taught business habits and business methods. As it is, a lot of women who have property are perfectly helpless unless they have some male friend to advise them."

"And most women have such friends," he answered, "who are only too glad to act for them, and save them all business worry and trouble."

"But why should a woman worry her friends to do what she ought to be able to do for herself?"

"It may be no worry at all, but only a pleasure," he answered, with a benignant smile.

"In some cases it may not be regarded as a trouble, I admit," she answered thoughtfully. "In other cases it may be a very great trouble. And then, suppose the professed friend should be no friend at all?"

"An unlikely supposition," he answered, still smiling. "Women generally know who's who."

"I'm not so sure of that," she answered, turning her head and looking him full in the face. "Think of the awful mistakes women make where men are concerned."

"You mean matrimonially?"

"Yes; and in other ways. I don't think it is a healthy arrangement for any normal individual, whether man or woman, to be entirely dependent on somebody else."

"Then you would like to manage your business affairs without my aid?" he questioned slowly, and with a curious inflection in his voice.

"I did not say so," she answered quickly. "I said I wished I knew more about business. When you talk about stocks and discounts and mortgages and premiums, and all that kind of thing, I feel quite out of it."

"When we are married I will teach you," he said, with a reassuring smile. "In the meanwhile, such judgment and business training as I have are entirely at your service."

They had reached the house by this time, and walked into the drawing-room together. Mary rang and ordered tea to be brought, and then tried to brace herself for the ordeal that was before her.

If Mr. Smart was worried he made no sign of it. His eyes were bright, his brow unclouded, his smile as genial as the spring sunshine.

"I have brought the necessary papers along with me for you to sign," Mr. Smart went on, as soon as he was comfortably seated; "and by to-morrow we can have the thing completed."

"Is there any necessity for so much haste?" she questioned innocently.

He started and looked at her with an expression of surprise.

"So much haste?" he questioned. "Well, really, Mary——"

Then he smiled broadly.

"Is my question so very foolish?" she asked, with a pained look in her eyes.

"No, no; not foolish," he said patronisingly. "But in matters of business we cannot afford to waste a week over a simple transaction."

"It was not that I was thinking of exactly," she answered quietly, but firmly. "But just now, when John Digby may turn up at any moment, it does not seem quite the thing, does it, to meddle with the present disposition of the property?"

"Quite the thing, Mary," he said, in bland and conciliatory tones. "The proposed sale is in the interests of the estate, and consequently in the interests of the owner of the estate, whoever he or she may be."

"You think if the real owner knew he would approve?"

"Of course he would approve, supposing such a person exists as you mention—any business man would approve."

"Then you still doubt the existence of John Digby?" she questioned.

"Of course I do," he answered, in bored tones. "Why, my dear child, more than a week has elapsed since the alleged discovery was made, and yet this



apocryphal individual has never yet shown his face to anyone."

"But you must admit that there is a young man in existence somewhere who has all the marks by which Harry Digby's son was distinguished."

"Why should I admit that?" he asked sharply. "Or, why should you admit it?"

"Well, surely the testimony of two medical men, to say nothing of the nurse, is not to be treated as an old wives' fable?"

"Oh, I do not wish to deny what the doctors have said, or what the nurse has said," he answered, in a tone of lofty condescension. "Very likely they have met a case similar to what I may term the original. Nature is constantly repeating herself, duplicating her vagaries, if I may so speak. But if Harry Digby's son were alive he would have been discovered years ago."

"Had he lived in England—yes. But this young man, report says, has spent all his life in America."

"In America?"

He almost gasped, and he half rose from his chair, then sat down again.

For a moment or two silence fell between them. Mary wanted to tell him of the rumours that were in circulation concerning him. She felt that she would never have a more favourable opportunity, and yet somehow she did not know how or where to begin. The right words would not come to her. To tell him straight out without softening the blow in any way would be a brutal thing to do, and, after all, the accusation might be cruelly and wickedly unjust.

Yet she felt that he ought to know, or, if he knew already, she ought to let him know that the gossip had reached her ears. But while she was racking her

brains for a suitable form of words, David was really recovering himself. The next moment she felt that he had spiked her gun.

"Well, let us suppose, for argument's sake," he said, "that Harry Digby's son is alive"—and he smiled bravely. "Let us go even further, and suppose that he will be able to prove his claim. That will not trouble you, Mary?"

"I shall be rejoiced," she answered brightly.

"And I shall be released from any further responsibility," he went on quietly. "That will mean, of course, that you will not need me as much as formerly, but I shall need you, and desire you all the same. And we can be quite happy, little girl, can we not?"

What could she say? His words gave the lie to all the rumours that were in circulation. Her doubts began to disperse as rapidly as they had gathered.

"In a smaller way," he went on, "we shall still be able to carry on the good work that is dear to both our hearts."

"I am not at all sure that I love the work," she said a little defiantly. "I was bound to do something. I could not spend the money on myself. I have taken the path of least resistance, that is all. But I hate being spoken of as a philanthropist."

"Oh, well, we will not dispute about words and names," he said, with a gentle smile. "But let us get back to the point at which we started. Your title for the present is undisputed. You are in possession, and you are bound to act for the best."

"But I don't think the houses need be sold—at any rate, just yet. Nobody will run away with them."

His cheeks flushed slightly, but he replied in his blindest manner—

"As you will, Mary. The papers I have prepared can be thrown on the fire."

"Have you been to a good deal of trouble already?" she questioned.

"Let us say nothing about trouble or expense," he answered genially. "I ought to have consulted you before taking any steps at all. You see, I took it for granted that you——"

"And now you find me silly and stupid," she interrupted. "Just because I have had no business training——"

"You are quite right in not allowing me to take things for granted," he said, with a laugh. "You see, you have allowed me to have so much my own way that I have got to presume."

"Please don't," she said impulsively. "You have never presumed. Let us talk of something else."

"I must bring before you one other matter of business," he said.

"Oh, I hate business!" she said, attempting to laugh at the same time; "but if I must hear it, I must."

"This is no attempt to disturb the *status quo*," he replied, in the same conciliatory tone. "But four thousand pounds' worth of Brazilian railway bonds have been redeemed, and the money now waits re-investment. Will you give me the necessary authority?"

"You would buy four thousand pounds' worth of fresh stock?"

"That is the proper thing to do. While the money is lying in the bank, it is practically earning nothing."

"And you know of a good investment?"

He smiled a little pityingly, as though he had been asked by a child if he knew the multiplication table.

"At present there are several things worth buying," he said persuasively; "but the matter can stand over if you prefer?"

His gentleness and sweet reasonableness robbed her of all power of opposition. She felt angry with herself that she had ever given house-room to a single doubt. Her mother was quite right. His lifelong consistency ought to be a sufficient answer to every calumny.

"There is no need for any delay," she said, smiling at him. "I will sign anything you like."

He had his fountain pen ready, and while she appended her signature to one or two documents, he spoke of the good work that was being done at the Temple, and then enlarged on the religious and philanthropic activities of the town of Longhampton. Apart from business, he seemed to have no other concern than religion. Even his lovemaking took a scriptural turn, and his romance was as unromantic as the marriage service.

He was putting his fountain pen back into his pocket when Mrs. Maxwell entered, and for a while conversation became general.

He declined an invitation to dinner—declined it with many regrets, but he had a meeting at the Temple that evening, a meeting for testimony, he explained to Mrs. Maxwell, and he felt bound to be present. He begged Mary in a jocular tone not to press him to stay, lest the temptation should prove too strong for him; but he would be so pleased if she would walk with him as far as the lodge gates.

Mrs. Maxwell was delighted to find that the cloud had been lifted from Mary's mind and spirits, and when they walked away together she inwardly gave them her blessing.

Mr. Smart made a brave attempt to be a little more demonstrative in his affection. He even pressed her to name an early day for the wedding, and had he followed up the matter he might have got the date fixed then and there, for Mary was in a contrite mood, and was anxious to do penance for doubting him as she had done. But David Smart was but a tepid lover at the best, and his mind was so obsessed by other and weightier matters that he was unable to concentrate himself on the task of lovemaking.

The daylight had nearly faded out of the sky when they parted at the lodge gates, and Mary turned her face again towards the house.

Was it the memory of her morning's walk, or did some mischievous spirit whisper doubts in her ear? David Smart's footsteps were still echoing on the hard road; his kiss was still warm on her cheek; and yet her whole soul was once more in revolt.

Directly he passed out of sight the spell was broken. How weak she had been. How completely he had disarmed and silenced her. She had not noticed his change of front until now. On Saturday he was for fighting the usurper, if he turned up, with every weapon of the law. To-day, nothing mattered. He was the very embodiment of meekness and conciliation. Why this sudden right-about-face, and why these pressing money transactions, when the air was full of rumours of the most sinister kind?

Her mother was waiting for her, evidently anxious to know the result of their interview.

"Did you mention to David the silly rumour you heard this morning?" she questioned.

"No, mother, I did not."

"Why was that?"

"I hadn't the courage, I suppose. Besides, he disarms one ; he is so kind and considerate."

"He has always been that."

"Yes, I know. I wish I had never heard of old Robert Digby's money. It just spoils everything."

"But are you suspicious of David still ?"

"I hardly know what I am, mother. While he was here I felt that he was one of the best men that ever breathed, and yet, almost before he was out of sight a dozen disquieting questions were hammering at my brain for an answer."

"You need a holiday, Mary, that's what's the matter with you. The spring is always a little trying. Have you fixed the wedding-day yet ?"

"Not yet, mother ; and if my present mood continues I shall never fix it. Now, let us turn our attention to something more pleasant."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### FRAMES OF MIND

DAVID SMART journeyed back from his interview with Mary in a jubilant mood. If the worst came to the worst he would not be entirely stranded, and he would have time in which to turn round. He told himself that he had been carrying out a scriptural injunction and "making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness." If all his schemes failed, the world was still before him.

He called at his house to get a hurried meal before the meeting, and found a brief telegram from Dr. Wilks to say he would call on the following morning.

"More trouble, I expect," he muttered to himself; "that blundering fool muddles everything, and yet his cunning is remarkable."

And he crushed the telegram in his hand and threw it into the fire.

Meanwhile Dr. Albert Wilks was walking the streets of Tottenham in a state of great mental unrest. Fortunately for him, he read John Lostun's letter when Sophy was not in the room. For several minutes his agitation completely overcame him. His ruddy cheeks changed to a sickly yellow, his eyes grew big with horror.

Before Sophy returned he had regained in some measure his self-possession. Pushing the letter into his pocket he rose to his feet and staggered into the passage.

"Are you going out?" Sophy asked, coming in from the kitchen.

"For half an hour or so," he answered, making a brave effort to keep his voice steady.

"What's the matter with your overcoat?" she questioned. "You seem to have a difficulty in getting it on."

"Mistaken the pocket for the sleeve," he said, making a feeble attempt to laugh.

"Well, don't be long, or I shall go out," were her last words to him.

"All right; you need not consider me." And he pulled the door to behind him.

At the end of the avenue he got on a tramcar. His object was to get to a telegraph office where he was not known, so that he might despatch a hurried wire to David Smart.

That done he turned his face again toward Higson's Avenue, but he was in no hurry to reach it. Avoiding the broad and well-lighted tram route, he took narrow and quiet side streets, not that he was afraid of being seen, but he wanted to be free from distractions, so that he might think and shape for himself some plan of action.

He had been caught napping, and he felt that fact acutely. With all his cunning he had not been cunning enough. And yet he could not blame himself very much. Who would have imagined that John Lostun would send the medicine to an analyst? To begin with, he had not the remotest suspicion that Lostun mistrusted him. On the contrary, he believed



that he regarded him as his greatest friend and benefactor.

What could be the explanation? Had he become suddenly suspicious, or had he mistrusted him all along?

But worse still, what would happen when Lostun knew the result of the analysis?

"I'm not troubled about the mixture," he said to himself with a worried look in his eyes. "It would have made him frightfully sick and ill if he had taken it, and he would have sent for me, and I should have kept him in bed, of course, and—and—the rest. But the tabloids! Good heavens! Any chemist's apprentice could find out in five minutes what they are made of;" and he unbuttoned his overcoat. He felt hot and oppressed.

"It's clear enough what he means," he went on. "And when John Lostun means a thing he'll do it. Generous he no doubt is, but he's no sentimentalist. Great Scott! But I've run my head into a pretty tight noose at last. What am I to do now? He's given me a fortnight to turn round in. There's no mistaking his meaning;" and he buttoned his coat again, and turned down a street that looked more deserted than the rest.

"The game's up—that's clear," he continued; "and Sophy's chance is gone for ever. Oh, well, Sophy will soon console herself. If the worst comes to the worst, there's always Frank Harley to fall back on. But I'm up a gum tree. I shall get one more pull at the lawyer, and then I must make myself scarce."

He reached Higson's Avenue at length, and when he came to No. 239 he found the house in darkness, save for a feeble light in the passage.

"Sophy's gone out to see her friends, I expect,"

he muttered. "So much the better. I don't want her prying eyes on me to-night."

Letting himself in with a latchkey, he stole quietly into the little dining-room, threw himself into an easy-chair by the fire, and lighted a cigar. He was still in a condition of great nervous excitement. It seemed to him as if the end of the world had come. What he had been working and scheming and sinning for, for eight long months, had suddenly vanished, leaving him in a worse position than he was in before.

For a minute or two the moral side of the question seemed to float vaguely before his clouded vision, and a far-off echo of an almost forgotten truth beat feebly upon his ear—"The way of transgressors is hard." He wondered if it were always true. Was it true? Was there a moral order as well as a physical? Old Bob Digby had resolved to be rich, and by all accounts his life was a tragedy—a bitter, mocking irony. And so acutely did the old man feel this that he prophesied that his money would be a curse. So far it had been a curse to more than one individual. David Smart's life had been cursed by it for more than twenty years, and for the last eight months it had been cursing his and Sophy's. During the last few months he had sunk to moral depths that at one time he would never have dreamed of. He had never been a saint—had never desired to be one, but that he could have become in intention, if not in act, a——

But no, he could not whisper the word even to himself. He sprang to his feet, and began to pace restlessly and excitedly up and down the room.

There was the sound of a latchkey in the door, and a minute later Sophy entered.

"Why are you in the dark?" she asked snappishly.

"I was just on the point of lighting the gas," he answered mildly. "I have been sitting in the fire-light smoking."

"Napping, more likely."

"I may have had forty winks. The house was very quiet."

"How would you like to be in it all day long, from January to Christmas?"

"Home is woman's dominion," he said impressively.

"Woman's prison, you mean. I wish you wouldn't preach."

"You are out of temper to-night, Sophy. You miss Lostun."

"I don't do anything of the sort. I'm glad to be free of him for a bit."

"He might have come to see you before he went away."

"I'm glad he didn't. Besides, he knows his own business best." And she went upstairs to take off her hat and jacket.

Albert Wilks slept very little that night; almost with the dawn he got up and dressed himself and stole softly downstairs. It was no good disturbing Sophy. She was nearly always cross in the morning, and he would be much happier having his breakfast alone.

He quickly laid and lighted the dining-room fire; then he went into the little kitchen and cooked his bacon over a gas stove. He had done this hundreds of times before, and so was quite an adept at the art.

Very softly he went to and fro between the kitchen and the dining-room. While the bacon was cooking he laid the tablecloth and made the tea. Now and then he paused and listened, but there was no sound

to indicate that Sophy was stirring. She was still in the land of dreams.

He sat down at length to his lonely breakfast. His appetite was good on the whole, but his thoughts were too busy for complete enjoyment of the meal. He ate slowly, and with an absent look in his eyes. His conscience had recovered its normal tone—*i.e.* it had ceased to trouble him; but he was acutely distressed at being found out. He had no doubt that Lostun had guessed the truth, and on his return his suspicions would be confirmed. That was the most disquieting feature in the entire situation. There seemed only one course open to him, and that was to get away somewhere where he was not known, and start life afresh. To face Lostun again, and the exposure that would follow if he attempted to brazen it out, would be an impossibility. He was proud still, in spite of the many mean and sordid shifts of his inglorious career.

Dr. Wilks went out and closed the door softly behind him. The morning was raw and cold. According to the calendar, spring was breaking o'er the land, but the land bore no evidence of the fact. The frost had nipped all the early buds, and the bare trees still shivered in the wintry blasts.

Dr. Wilks felt more nervous than usual as the train bore him towards Longhampton. He was getting a little afraid of David Smart. The lawyer's strong personality rather overawed him. Moreover, he could not get over the fact that in nearly every encounter he had been worsted. Even when he seemed to score, the lawyer had in reality gained his point.

He approached the lawyer's office with slow and somewhat hesitating steps. He had rehearsed his part to himself during most of the night, but even

now he was not sure that he had got it off perfectly. The lawyer was so clever in divining his motives, and in discovering all the weak places in his armour. He hesitated for a moment at the door, then climbed the steps to the outer office.

## CHAPTER XXX

### WAITING FOR THE STORM

DAVID SMART did not rise from his chair when Dr. Wilks entered. He scarcely looked at him ; he appeared to be intent on some papers that lay open on his writing-table. Dr. Wilks carefully laid his hat on a chair and threw his gloves into it ; then he drew himself up to his full height and faced the lawyer. However nervous he might feel, he was determined to put a bold face on the matter.

" Won't you be seated ? " David said indifferently.

" Thank you." And he dropped carefully into an easy-chair near the fire.

For a moment or two there was silence. Then David twisted himself round in his swivel chair and faced his guest. " Well ? " he questioned.

" You got my telegram last evening ? "

" I did."

" You will be interested to know that the heir has left the country."

" Left the country ! "

Dr. Wilks nodded. He conceived at the moment that a silent nod would be more impressive than speech.

" Then he does not know yet who he is ? "

" He does not ; and, what is more, he never need know."

"Then he has left the country for good?"

"On the contrary. He expects to be back again in a few weeks at the outside."

"Oh, he does, does he? Then I don't see where we benefit."

"He must be prevented from coming back."

"Glad to hear you say so. Will you explain how it is to be done?"

"He must be followed. Things are easy in America that would be impossible here."

"You have been there?"

"That's nothing to the point. Nevertheless, I know what I am talking about."

"And you propose to follow him?"

"On certain conditions."

"Please go on."

"I cannot go to America without money. Besides, if I fail, I shall never be able to return to England again."

"And why not, pray?"

"For obvious reasons. Surely I need not go into particulars?"

"Then you think it is neck or nothing with you?" and Mr. Smart smiled cynically.

"I am playing for big stakes, and big stakes mean big risks. Your own experience must have taught you that."

David Smart shrugged his shoulders, but did not reply.

"I've never hidden from you that I'm hard up," Dr. Wilks went on. "And it's just that that makes me take risks. If I were not so confoundedly poor, I'd wash my hands of the whole affair. I'm beginning to wonder if playing the rogue as you and I are doing pays in the long run."

David started, and clenched his hands.

"Speak for yourself," he said savagely. "When have I played the rogue?"

"Oh, never, of course. You had nothing to do with the kidnapping of young Digby? Nor your sister? Nor her worthless husband? You have lived a blameless life, and managed the Digby estates purely in the interests of charity."

"Did you come here to pick a quarrel with me?" Smart asked, his eyes blazing with anger.

"I don't think I did; and on the whole I think it would be better for you that we didn't quarrel."

"Better for me?"

"Perhaps better for both of us; for, after all, we are in the same boat. So we will come back to business, if you don't mind."

"Please go on," David said caustically.

"Digby's heir left England yesterday for America. If I don't follow, he will return again. If he returns again, your game is up, and mine also."

"He may return again if you do follow him. You are such a bungler."

"Don't call names; things are not always as easy as they look."

"And on the other side they may be still more difficult."

"If I fail, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you will never see me again. But I shall not fail."

"You know where to find him?"

"Of course I do. But I shall want a thousand pounds to carry out my scheme."

"A thousand fiddlesticks!"

"It is only a twentieth part of the whole."

"And if I refuse?"

"I shall have to take again to making pills. And



you—ah, well, you can answer that question better than I.” And he smiled knowingly.

For a while there was silence. Then David said—

“ When do you propose to start ? ”

“ The sooner the better. On Saturday, at latest.”

The conversation was continued for another hour, and was enlivened by occasional bursts of anger ; but in the end Dr. Wilks walked out of the office with a smile upon his face, while David threw himself into an easy-chair and stared gloomily into the fire.

Dr. Wilks took the earliest train back to town, and dined that evening at a West-end restaurant. He was in possession of more ready cash than he ever had in his life before. Consequently, he was in the humour to enjoy himself while he had the opportunity.

Not so, however, Mr. Smart. David was growing decidedly pessimistic. All his schemes were failing at one and the same moment. He was not troubled about the money he had given to Wilks. When he considered the stake for which he was playing, it was the merest flea-bite. His anxiety had its roots very much deeper. He had no faith in Wilks’ ability. He was only a bungler at the best. Very likely he was a coward, and the chances were he would fail again as he had failed before.

Smart had no longer any doubts as to the existence of Digby’s heir, and after all the publicity that had been given, it seemed impossible that he could remain much longer in ignorance of his identity unless Wilks should succeed in tracking him down.

Mr. Smart stared at the fire and inwardly groaned. How was it to be done ? He tried to put himself in Wilks’ place, tried to evolve some scheme by which such a project could be carried safely through. He believed he was a much cleverer man than the doctor,

and yet he could devise no plan that had in it the smallest prospect of success.

He went to his writing-table at length, and began to examine bundles of carefully docketed papers.

"I must be prepared for eventualities," he said to himself. "Nothing must be left to chance. It is hard, after all these years of waiting, to see one's hopes and dreams dissolving into thin air."

David Smart could not help feeling that on the whole he had been hardly used. He had lived chiefly for the public good. He had not spared himself in works of charity. For the best part of twenty years he had preached the Gospel without salary. He had taken his share of civic and municipal responsibility, and no man could say he had been extravagant in his personal expenditure.

His house was simple, and conducted on lines of strict economy. His manner of life had been sober and well ordered, his habits temperate and regular. And if he had desired wealth, had it not been that he might exercise a greater influence for good and extend his sphere of usefulness? The ambition to be the mayor of his own town, or its representative in the councils of the nation, was surely not an ignoble one.

Had he been a bad man, a wastrel, a corrupter of youth, a gluttonous man, or a drunkard, there might be some reason why in the moral order his schemes should be frustrated.

But he was a good man. People had said so so often that he had got to believe it himself. He had done no wrong. It was not his wish that Harry Digby's son should be taken to America and deserted, but that he should grow up as Amos Chadwick's son and be properly cared for, and he was prepared to do what was necessary in that direction.

It was true he preferred the girl heir to the boy. The boy was the son of a harum-scarum father, and might be expected when he grew up to make ducks and drakes of old Digby's fortune if it ever came into his hands. The girl had good parents, and would in all probability grow up to be a good woman. Hence it was in the interests of all the virtues that she should have the disposal of the property. How, then, under any strictly moral code, could he be blamed for the benevolent schemes he had tried to work out, even if those schemes should be brought out into the light of day ?

He knew, of course, that he lived in a censorious world and in a hypocritical age, and that if it were discovered that he had presumed upon being the husband of Mary Maxwell and had anticipated certain eventualities, no mercy would be shown him, especially by the bigoted votaries who expected to be saved by works, and made light of his favourite doctrine of salvation by faith.

Mr. Smart sighed more than once as these thoughts passed through his mind. He was as convinced as he had ever been that he had lived a life of great usefulness, and, what was more, he had cherished schemes of far greater usefulness in the future ; and now it seemed to him as though all his good endeavours were to be brought to a sudden end.

For the time being the bright horizon of his faith was somewhat overcast. He wondered what would become of the Temple if he, its chief pillar, were removed. What would become of the saints if he should be no longer able to break unto them week by week the bread of life ?

If only the world could be brought to judge things from the standpoint of faith, all would yet be right ;

but that was a consummation too good to be hoped for. The world insisted still on standing on the letter of the law, though it was known to everybody that in sight of the law no man living could be justified.

It seemed strange to him that men could be such hypocrites, that all should insist on obedience, when all knew that obedience was impossible ; that a man should condemn a brother for failing in the law when he never kept the law himself.

Mr. Smart shrugged his shoulders a little contemptuously. Then he opened his safe, and carefully examined a number of papers. These he replaced at length, and closed and locked the safe. Then he returned to his writing-table and busied himself for a few minutes longer, after which he went home. There was no meeting at the Temple that night, so he spent the evening in reading.

During the next fortnight Mr. Smart kept himself more completely to himself than he had ever been known to do before. There were important public gatherings in the town, but he did not show himself at any one of them. He was conscious that he was being talked about in the town. People looked askance at him in the streets, and on one or two occasions conversation came to an abrupt end when he appeared on the scene.

He was afraid to ask any questions lest some of his worst fears should be confirmed. He began to read the local Press with considerable diligence ; but though the chances of Bob Digby's heir turning up were fully discussed, his own name was carefully avoided.

The uncertainty got upon his nerves after a while. The air seemed electrical. He was waiting for the first lightning flash to indicate that the storm had broken.

Almost anything seemed better than the long-drawn-out suspense.

One afternoon, instead of going back to the office after lunch, he took train to London. He was anxious to find out if possible what Wilks was doing, or whether he was doing anything at all. He had scarcely any more faith in his assurances than he had in his ability.

After some difficulty, he found himself at Rose Villa, Tottenham. An untidy charwoman opened the door, and showed him without ceremony into the drawing-room, where Sophy and an elderly gentleman were having tea together.

Sophy sprang out of her chair with flushed face and a questioning light in her eyes, while David made as good an apology as he was able under the circumstances.

"Oh, please don't mind," Sophy said, with a giggle, leading the way out into the passage, and from thence into the small dining-room. "My maid is out. I understand you came to see my father. Won't you sit down a few minutes?"

"Thank you."

And Mr. Smart dropped becomingly into the one easy-chair the room contained.

"My father is from home at present," Sophy went on. "In fact, he has gone abroad, and may be absent some weeks. You wanted to consult him professionally?"

"I did. May I ask if he has been gone long?"

"Oh no; only two or three days. He did intend, I believe, going a week earlier; but could not get away."

"And you expect he will be absent some weeks?" Mr. Smart asked, slowly and painfully.

"I haven't the remotest idea when he will be back," she answered truthfully. "Father is generally somewhat erratic in his movements."

"Isn't it difficult for a medical man to be absent so long?"

"Haven't the ghost of an idea," she replied, with another giggle.

"Perhaps you don't know to what part of the world he has betaken himself?"

"Oh yes, I do. He has only run across to America, and nobody thinks anything of that nowadays."

"You will not follow him, I presume?"

"Not likely. Old England is good enough for me;" and she giggled again.

Mr. Smart rose slowly to his feet, with a pained look in his eyes.

"Whom shall I say has called when I write to father?" Sophy inquired.

"I beg pardon. I thought I gave your servant my card. But it doesn't matter. I'm afraid I've kept you from tea. I apologise most sincerely. Good-afternoon!"

Sophy opened the door for him and saw him into the street. Then she returned to her companion and to her tea.

Mr. Smart made his way back to Longhampton in a very uneasy frame of mind.

"I don't know what to believe," he said to himself. "The rascal may have left the country for a totally different reason, and got money out of me on false pretences. I feel like a man walking along the edge of a cliff in the dark."

The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became. Supposing Digby's heir had gone to America on business, he might be on his way back

again by this time. If Wilks had really meant what he said he would not have waited a week ; he would have started at once.

The only comforting reflection was that Wilks had actually gone. That meant something. And yet he feared he could not count on very much coming of it.

He scarcely slept at all that night. He felt that the elaborate castle he had been so many years in building was falling about his ears like a house of cards, and he could do nothing to prevent the disaster.

His only hope was Albert Wilks, and he was a broken reed at best—a man who would betray his best friend for a five-pound note.

Mr. Smart wrote brief but affectionate letters to Mary Maxwell explaining his absence. Press of work kept him at his office till nearly bedtime every night. What with his private practice and the management of the Digby estate, he was left with very little time for anything else.

Mary read these letters with very mixed feelings. She was still tossed about on an angry sea of uncertainty. She had done her best to destroy the suspicions that had taken root in her mind, and was almost angry with herself that she had only partially succeeded. The gossip that had convulsed Longhampton and neighbourhood for a week or more was beginning to die down into silence. Nothing happened. The heir did not reveal himself. The story of David Smart's perfidy lacked confirmation. The lawyer did his work as serenely and as unostentatiously as before. He smiled as benignantly as if the hounds of slander had never been let loose.

Mary became restless and irritable, and in some respects unreasonable. She resented David's long

absence, and yet was thankful he did not come. She praised him for his devotion to her interests, and blamed him for letting business matters absorb all his time. She was angry with the gossips for filling her mind with doubts, and angrier with Digby's heir for not coming forward and settling the thing once for all, and, perhaps, angriest of all with herself for not having more patience and steadfastness and courage.

So three weeks passed away—weeks of exhausting tension and nervous unrest. Every morning she rose with a feeling that something was about to happen, and every evening found her still waiting and wondering ; then the truth was made manifest as in a flash. She knew the best and the worst.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### NEWS BY CABLE

THE New York correspondent of the *Times* cabled a message which was copied into nearly every newspaper in the kingdom on the following day. David Smart read it, and grew pale to the lips. Mary Maxwell read it, and her eyes burned with a strange fire. Tom Verney read it, and danced round his room in sheer delight. Brindley, the grocer, read it, and laughed till the tears ran down his face. Sophy Wilks did not read it. She scarcely ever looked at a newspaper. Moreover, she was too deeply absorbed in other things.

As soon as Mary Maxwell had recovered herself, and was able to control her feelings, she sought out her mother, and handed her the paper to read. Mrs. Maxwell saw in a moment that something had happened, but forebore to ask any questions.

The gossip of three weeks before had prepared her in some measure for the revelation, and yet the bald, matter-of-fact statement almost took her breath away.

Mrs. Maxwell laid down the paper at length and looked at her daughter in silence.

"Well?" Mary questioned, in a hard, unemotional voice.

"It seems incredible, Mary!"

" But it is vouched for in every detail."

" Yes, I see. I do not understand it. I think you should wire to David at once, and ask him to come and explain.

" If it is not true, he will come without asking."

" And if it is true, Mary ? "

" He will not show his face at Winterholme again."

" Oh, but it cannot be true," Mrs. Maxwell protested, in a sudden burst of energy.

" What is the use of saying that, mother ? " Mary replied, in a voice of unnatural calm. " You feel as I feel, that there is no room left for doubt."

" Mary, how can you say so ? "

" It is not a bit of use, mother, burying our heads in the sand. We may as well face the facts. For my own part, I am thankful the tension is over ! "

" But think what it means if it is true ! "

" There can be no doubt as to what it means," was the quiet answer ; " and there can be no longer any doubt as to the truth of the story. You remember when Mr. Lostun first came to Winterholme how you were struck with his likeness to Harry Digby ? "

" That may, of course, be a mere coincidence."

" Rather a link in an almost perfect chain, mother."

" You seem determined to think the worst possible of David Smart. Think of his life, of his devotion and self-sacrifice. Think how he has lived for more than twenty years in the public eye. Think of his piety, of his zeal in the cause of religion. How can you reconcile such a life with a story like this ? " And she threw the paper on the floor with a gesture of impatience.

" I do not pretend to reconcile the two things," Mary answered, picking up the paper and glancing at the fatal paragraph. " But here is the sworn

deposition of Sarah Chadwick, sister of David Smart, with the names of the witnesses."

"It may be all false, Mary."

"It cannot be, mother. Here is the story. How John Lostun, by reading an article in the *Longhampton Post*, discovered his own identity; how he instituted inquiries, and had his suspicions aroused; how he was hurried suddenly to America on business; and how on reaching St. Louis he instituted inquiries for people of the name of Chadwick. There can be no fiction in that part of the story, anyhow."

"Perhaps not, Mary."

"But what motive could anyone have for inventing the rest? And would a correspondent go to the expense of cabling a story without verifying his facts?"

"Why not? Half the things you read about in newspapers are pure romance."

"But you believe this story all the same, mother; you know you do."

"Speak for yourself, Mary."

"I am speaking for myself. Little Johnny Digby must have been taken to America by someone. This Sarah Chadwick, dying of a lingering disease in a charity home, tells how she and her husband were paid by David Smart to spirit away the child; how her husband took the little fellow into the streets and lost him; how her own child died soon after; how she and her husband struggled on for a good many years, and then he died; how her conscience has tormented her all the time; how David Smart refused to send any more money when he discovered that the child had disappeared; and how, when John Lostun came to her, she recognised him, not only by the birthmarks, but by the mark of a burn which she described

beforehand. All this is too circumstantial to be the invention of newspaper men."

"I admit the story hangs very well together," Mrs. Maxwell said slowly and reluctantly; "but what motive could David Smart have in resorting to such a trick?"

"The lust of riches, mother. He meant to get the control of Robert Digby's fortune; and he nearly succeeded, too. Don't you think we ought to fall on our knees and thank Heaven that I have been saved?"

"Has your love for him been destroyed so quickly?"

"I never did love him, mother. But somehow he overawed me, fascinated me, bore down my will, and interpreted my silence as giving consent."

"But did you not give your consent?"

"I don't know, mother. He hypnotised me. I have no clear recollection of what he said, or what I said; and when I came to myself it seemed too late to protest. Besides, I believed in him then, and marrying him seemed the easiest way out of the difficulty."

"But marriage without love, Mary——"

"How should I know anything about love?" she interrupted. "He said love would come. Besides, I wanted someone to lean upon, someone who understood business. He was necessary to me. Oh, mother, it is like some horrid nightmare!"

"My child, you are unstrung and hysterical. You should go to your room and rest a few hours."

"No; I don't think I am unstrung, mother. I am strung up. I am happier than I have been for months—for years. The horrible prospect of marriage has passed away like a cloud."

"Mary, what are you saying?"

"I shall never think of marriage again, mother."

I shall devote myself to you, and to the school, and to my books."

"But suppose David Smart can prove to you that he never did this thing—that it is all a cruel, wicked lie——"

"I shall never marry him, mother," she interrupted.

"But why, Mary?"

"Because my eyes have been opened. Besides, he doesn't want me. It is the money he wants."

"You are very hard on him, Mary. I do hope he will come over to-day and clear up things."

"Suppose he does not come over?"

"Then I shall send for him to-morrow."

"And suppose he does not come then?"

"But he must come, Mary. He owes it to us. To you, if not to me."

"Ah, well, we shall see;" and Mary walked slowly out of the room.

During the rest of the day she alternated between a feeling of buoyancy and a sense of oppression. There were moments when she felt happier than she had been for years. It seemed as though a heavy and oppressive load had been suddenly lifted from her shoulders. She did not realise how heavy the load had been until now it was removed. She wanted to sing, to laugh, to dance, to go down into the village and tell people how happy she felt.

But these moments were always followed by a period of deep depression. She had known David Smart from her childhood. In her girlhood days he had seemed to her an embodiment of all the virtues. As a woman she had revered him and trusted him, and to discover now that from first to last he had led a double life was like a blow after a caress, a betrayal following a kiss. It seemed to shatter her faith in

human nature, to change her whole outlook upon life.

As the day wore away the bright gradually triumphed over the dark. She had more to be thankful for than to be depressed about. She was free once more to choose her own path and to live her life away from the glare of the public eye. It would be a little strange at first, no doubt, to discover that she was no longer a person of importance. She might miss the smiles and curtsies of those who had lived on her bounty, but she felt sure that she would be all the happier in consequence.

She hardly knew whether she was thankful or not that John Lostun was the heir. She had still a kind of horror of old Digby's money, and she admired John Lostun so much that she almost dreaded the effect the gold might have upon him. It would be a calamity if a nature so generous and sincere should be spoiled.

Late in the afternoon she went out for a walk alone. If David Smart was to visit Winterholme to-day he would come by a certain train. The weather was delightful, with all the warmth and freshness of spring. On every hand the trees were breaking into leaf. Along the borders of the drive graceful daffodils swayed in the breeze, and where the banks sloped towards the south large patches of primroses breathed their fragrance on the air.

Mary walked slowly and with a somewhat listless step. She was still torn by conflicting feelings. It would be a great relief if David Smart could clear himself of the charges that were now publicly brought against him, and yet she knew she almost dreaded his appearance. She saw the smoke of the train in the distance. In a few minutes it would be at the

station. If David Smart was innocent, he would be in that train. Why then did she hope he would not come ?

A troubled look came into her eyes, and she stood still for a few moments. High in the bare branches of an ash a throstle perched itself and began to sing. Mary lifted her face towards the speckle-breasted songster and listened, and as she did so the troubled look went out of her eyes and a smile dimpled her cheeks. There was no dolorous note in the throstle's song. It was hope and joy and victory from beginning to end. With what serene courage it faced the future. There might be stormy days and frosty nights, and hungry lawns and fields, where no solitary worm made its appearance. But what mattered it ? "The year was at the spring." The days were steadily lengthening, the broad earth was bursting into beauty. Why worry ? God was in His heaven, and all was right with the world.

The train had reached the station, and Mary continued her walk towards the lodge gates.

"Of course, I hope he is innocent," she said to herself ; "and yet—and yet I must be free."

She waited a few minutes at the gates, and then continued her walk down the lane towards the village.

"There he is," she said at length, with a little gasp, and her face grew perceptibly paler. "No, it is not he ;" and she drew a long breath as of relief.

She reached the outskirts of the village and waited ; but he did not come.

"I knew he would not," she said to herself ; and she hurried forward to the station to get an evening paper. There was not very much fresh news, however, about Lostun. There was a long article which recapitulated all that had appeared in the morning

paper, with one later announcement to the effect that if Sarah Chadwick was able to travel Lostun intended to bring her with him to England, as she had expressed a desire to die and be buried in her native village.

Mary did not hurry on her return journey, but there was more spring in her step than when she started on her walk. The sun was beginning to skirt the hill, and was firing with the most brilliant colours the western sky. Beyond the lodge gates the trees were flinging long shadows across the park, and the wind was humming in the pines.

But in spite of the gathering shadows and the mournful droning of the wind, her spirits rose with every step she took.

"At last I am free," she kept saying to herself. "The fetters are broken, the burden is lifted, and I am free—free!"

In the bare branches of the ash the throistle was piping still. Mary almost laughed as she stood for a moment and listened. Its joyous and triumphant song seemed to harmonise so completely with her own feelings.

The depression came back again for a little while when she encountered her mother's troubled face. Mrs. Maxwell had hoped almost against hope that David would come to make everything straight and plain.

"I don't understand it at all," said she to Mary. "If he does not come first thing to-morrow morning, I shall wire to him."

"I don't think it will be of any use, mother."

"But he owes us an explanation, my child. You know he has scarcely been here at all for the last fortnight."



" Yes, I know ; but he has written frequently."

" Have you had a letter from him to-day ? "

" No, mother."

" I shall wire to him to-morrow morning."

Mrs. Maxwell kept her word ; but nothing came of it. She met at least two trains, and returned to her home after the last journey more troubled and perplexed than ever.

She did not say much to Mary, though she greatly wondered that the latter could take the matter so philosophically.

On the third morning she resolved to pay a visit to Longhampton. She would say nothing about the matter to Mary. Mary seemed to have given up worrying about anything, but for herself she felt that the suspense was becoming intolerable. She must know the truth, and know it from the lips of David Smart himself. Until the previous evening she had stubbornly refused to believe that there was any truth in the story of David's perfidy. But when he neither replied to her telegram nor came in person, confidence gave place to fear, and fear grew into torment. She had a feeling that if David were in any way compromised, she and Mary would suffer along with him.

She tried to be cheerful over breakfast, and wondered that Mary could face the loss of friend and fortune with so much equanimity.

" I'll do the shopping this morning, Mary," she said, as she rose from the table.

It was only on rare occasions that they breakfasted in the large dining-room with the teachers and the girls.

" Do you wish me to go into the school ? " Mary questioned.

“ Not unless you like, my dear ; ” and she hurriedly left the room.

She could not help wondering, as the train bore her towards Longhampton, what story David would have to tell. She was still not without hope that he would have a complete and satisfactory answer to every question. It seemed incredible that a man with so noble a record could be guilty of so gross a sin.

Her heart beat very uncomfortably as she walked up the busy street toward David's office. She knew the street well ; every twist and turn, almost every flag in the side-walk. It was in Longhampton she commenced her struggle for bread after the death of her husband, and she never traversed its familiar ways without recalling those days of peace and pain.

She felt almost out of breath when she reached the door of the building in which David had his office. At last she would know the truth, and the whole truth.

She stood still for a few moments, and placed her hand to her side as if to steady her heart's tumultuous beating, then began slowly to climb the stairs.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE TRUTH AT LAST

MRS. MAXWELL felt as though someone had struck her. The announcement was simple and commonplace enough, and under ordinary circumstances would have called for no remark ; but coming after the suspense of the last few days, it seemed to confirm her worst forebodings.

" You say he is out of town ? " she questioned, with a painful catch in her voice.

" He is in London, madam."

" But I sent him a wire yesterday morning, asking him to call at Winterholme ! "

" Yes'm ; but he was not at home yesterday."

" Not at home yesterday ? " she questioned, with an emphasis on the last word.

" He went up to town on Tuesday morning, and does not expect to be back till the end of the week."

" This is unusual, isn't it ? "

" He has one or two important cases on hand," the clerk answered suavely, " and he may be detained longer than he expects."

" You have heard from him since he went away ? "

" I did not hear from him this morning, as I expected ; but I have no doubt he is very busy."

Mrs. Maxwell appeared to study the pattern of the

carpet for a few moments, then she turned abruptly, and, with a hasty good-morning, left the room.

Back to the station she threaded her way almost like one in a dream. She tried still to conquer her doubts, tried to believe that David was a just man wrongly accused, tried to find some reasonable excuse for his silence, but her doubts proved stronger than her will. She was pushed in spite of herself in the opposite direction from that to which she wanted to go.

She discovered also that giving foothold to one doubt was like opening the sluices of a mill dam—there was a rush of a thousand other doubts and fears. For a mere ordinary man of the world to be captured by the devil might not mean very much; but David Smart was no ordinary man. Moreover, if he had fallen, it was no sudden fall. The beginning of this thing went back well-nigh a quarter of a century, and through all these years he had been trusted by an unsuspecting people—trusted with their secrets and with their cash.

She felt quite exhausted by the time she reached Winterholme. The intensity of her fears, and the fierceness of the battle she waged against them, sapped her strength unconsciously.

Mary learned from the old housekeeper that her mother had gone to Longhampton, and was not far wrong in her surmise of the reason. She forebore, however, to ask any questions on Mrs. Maxwell's return. She saw by the look in her eyes that she was in trouble, and guessed that she had got no satisfaction out of her visit. It was not until tea-time that Mrs. Maxwell unburdened her heart.

"I am getting to feel very anxious and distressed, Mary," she said quietly, without raising her eyes.

"You have heard disquieting news to-day?"

"In a sense I have heard no news at all. I called

at David's office, and found that he left home the day before yesterday, and his clerk does not expect him back till the end of the week."

"Well, mother?"

"It is unusual, to say the least of it, and disquieting. Did he say anything to you in his last letter about being away from home?"

"Not a word. But what do you suspect?"

"I don't like to say I suspect anything, and yet I fear a great deal. If there be any truth in that kidnapping story——"

"He would not run away from that," Mary interrupted.

"You think not?"

"Why should he? His denial would be as good as his sister's asseveration. No; if that's the only accusation, he'll face it out, and, what is more, he'll win."

"But there can be nothing else, Mary?"

"There may be a good many things, mother, but we had better wait and see what time will reveal."

Mrs. Maxwell heaved a deep sigh, and relapsed into silence.

Mary began to feel worried about money matters, but she said nothing about this to her mother. She could not help recalling his visit three weeks ago, and his anxiety to get her to sign certain documents. In the light of recent events that seemed to have a very sinister look. She was thankful now that she had refused to give him permission to sell the houses. But what about the railway bonds that had been redeemed? Had he re-invested the money, and, if not, did the money still stand in her name at the bank?

On the following morning she took a journey to

Longhampton to see her banker. She felt very nervous and ill at ease. She had never interviewed him before—never deemed it necessary to do so. Mr. Smart had managed everything, and managed everything, she believed, in the most satisfactory manner.

She was almost afraid to go in when she reached the door. She did not wish to awaken unnecessary suspicion, and yet how to discuss money affairs without producing that result she did not know. Anyhow, she would have to take the risk, and, if needs be, take the banker into her confidence and make a clean breast of all her fears.

Mr. Cowper received her very graciously, conducted her to his private room—known locally as the sweating-room—wheeled up for her an easy-chair, and then waited for her to explain her business.

She plunged at once into the heart of the subject. The direct way seemed the easiest.

“ You know, of course, that Robert Digby’s real heir has been discovered ? ”

“ I’ve heard and read the reports,” he said, with a smile.

“ I don’t think there’s the least shadow of a doubt as to who he is,” she went on ; “ and for my own part, I’m glad. You know I have never wanted the money, and what I want to know now is, is everything in order, so that when Mr. Digby comes back, I can wash my hands clean of the whole matter ? ”

“ Your solicitor can tell you that better than I, Miss Maxwell,” he said quietly.

“ Mr. Smart is out of town,” she said, “ and may not be back for several days ; and in the meanwhile I want to know just how matters stand.”

“ But you have your pass-book ? ”

"No. I let Mr. Smart have it the last time he called. He said he would leave it here to be made up."

"Then probably it is here;" and he touched a bell. "Bring Miss Maxwell's pass-book," he said to the clerk, "and balance it up to date."

In a few minutes the clerk was back again.

"We have not the book, sir," he said.

"Oh, well, never mind;" and the clerk withdrew. "He evidently forgot to leave it," he said, turning to Mary.

"But you can find out from your books?" she questioned.

"Of course. Is there anything particular you want to know?"

"Some South American railway bonds were redeemed, I believe, about a month ago?"

"To what amount?"

"Four thousand pounds."

He touched the bell again, and in a moment or two one or two large books lay in front of him. He turned over the leaves rapidly, and glanced down the rows of figures.

"Quite right," he said.

"Is that four thousand pounds still in the bank?"

He turned to another book.

"It appears to have been paid out to your own order," he said, after a moment's pause.

"And have you received bonds or scrip to that amount since?"

There was another ring of the bell, and another book was brought.

"No, Miss Maxwell," he said, after a long pause.

For several moments there was silence. Then Mary said—

"Are all the securities of the Digby estate lodged in your strong-room?"

"That is more than I can say," he answered. "We keep the gold bonds, and cut them out as they fall due. We have also a large deod-box in the strong-room. What it contains, of course, I do not know. You should know better than I;" and he smiled again.

"I have left business affairs almost exclusively in the hands of Mr. Smart," she said, with downcast eyes.

"I—I hope they are all right."

"I hope so," he said seriously.

She started and looked up at him.

"Do you know anything?" she asked.

"I know nothing," he said, "except—except that one or two people are getting a little anxious about his long absence from home."

"Is it so unusual?" she asked.

"That is more than I can answer," he replied, with a grave look.

"But you say people in Longhampton are beginning to remark upon his absence?" she questioned.

"A few people are a little concerned. If he does not return to-morrow, I fear the concern will become general."

"There's no denying, Mr. Cowper, I'm anxious myself," she said, in a burst of candour. "After what has appeared in the papers this week, one begins to fear the worst."

Mr. Smart did not return on the following day, nor did any news of him reach Longhampton. His managing clerk, who had worn a cheerful countenance during most of the week, began to look anxious and careworn. The callers at the office increased in number



steadily, and the business of answering so many questions not only became irksome but exhausting.

On Saturday afternoon the office closed at two o'clock, and the worn-out clerk was thankful to turn the key in the door and escape the cross-examination of Mr. Smart's anxious and in some cases wrathful clients.

On Sunday there was something like mild consternation in the town, and particularly at the Temple. Whatever might come or go, David Smart was never known to neglect his religious duties. Even in the summer, when he went away for a brief holiday, he often returned to Longhampton from Saturday to Monday, so that he might take the Sunday service as usual. Hence, his absence on the present occasion was inexplicable.

The Temple was crowded. Not only had the brotherhood gathered in full force, but numbers of outsiders had pushed their way into the hall, curious to know if David would put in an appearance, or if any explanation would be given of his absence.

As the time approached for the service to begin, the elders and deacons began to look anxious. There was no one among them who felt equal to the task of expounding the Word that morning; their hearts were heavy with a sense of impending trouble. If anything had happened to David, if through any unlucky turn of Fate he should be unable to clear his name, what would become of their beloved Temple? Who would be able to minister to the stricken flock?

When eleven o'clock struck the suspense had become almost unbearable. During all the years of his ministry David had never been known to be late. His punctuality was only excelled by his zeal. The outsiders scattered throughout the congregation

smiled and nodded knowingly, but no demonstration was made, though there were a few present who felt like denouncing David as a Pharisee of the most approved type.

At length one of the elders mounted the rostrum and announced a hymn. But there was no heart in the singing that morning. All the spirit had been taken out of them. Before the hymn had dragged its slow length to the end, many of the congregation had taken their departure. They were impatient to carry the news to others that David Smart had not returned.

The faithful ones who remained held a testimony meeting, but no note of triumph was heard that day. Every experience was tuned to a minor key. The allusions to David were vague and halting.

In the heart of some there was a vague fear that in his repudiation of good works as an essential of salvation he might have gone too far. They believed, of course, that grace would cover whatever sin he might have committed; and if he had done what the newspapers had been saying, they were certain he had done it in the interests of "the cause." Unfortunately, from their point of view a hypocritical and unbelieving generation would be sure to put an uncharitable construction upon his actions, and so bring the brotherhood into contempt. Yet strangely enough, before the week was out some of these faithful ones began to look at the matter in a very different light.

To manipulate the estate of old Bob Digby in the interest of "the cause," to make the stream of his ill-gotten gold irrigate the moral wastes of Longhampton, to turn the curse which he had predicted into a spiritual blessing—that was an achievement not to be

dismissed with an unholy sneer. Did not the end justify the means? Was not the motive greater than the deed?

But when, later in the week, they began to realise that their own savings were involved—that in the interest of “the cause” David Smart had not spared even the faithful—their fervent benedictions grew into something totally different, and for the first time they found it difficult to believe that David’s faith would be accounted to him for righteousness.

It was a heart-breaking week for many people. In the end the truth came out with a rush. David’s offices were stormed early on Monday morning, and every man who had had dealings with him began to hunt for his securities, to find in most instances that his deeds were bogus.

David’s method was very simple. When his friends intrusted him with money to invest for them, he was never long in finding a mortgage for them at  $4\frac{1}{2}$  or 5 per cent. The mortgage deeds were made out in due form, and David undertook to collect the interest. This interest was always paid by David on the day. So, as the faithful saved their little hoard, David took possession of it, and paid the interest regularly out of the capital.

This might have gone on to the day of his death, but for the appearance of John Lostun on the scene, and the subsequent cablegram from New York. David knew then that his game was up. When once suspicion was aroused and investigation began his chance was gone.

Long before the next Sabbath dawned there was literally weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth in Longhampton. All the services at the Temple were suspended. The faithful were the greatest sufferers,

for they had trusted him most implicitly, and however much they might deprecate good works as a means of salvation, it was too large an order for them to believe that David was a saint because he had faith.

Many who had been most shamelessly duped kept silent on the subject. They were too chagrined to proclaim their folly. But the majority thirsted for revenge.

Warrants were issued for David's arrest, and telegrams despatched to all parts of the country. Every seaport was watched, and alleged portraits appeared in scores of newspapers, but no true likeness was printed, and for the simple reason that David had always refused to have his photograph taken.

Mary Maxwell and her mother said very little to each other when all the truth came out. They, like all the rest, had been bitterly deceived and cruelly wronged, how deeply wronged they might never know.

Mary was haunted by the fear all the time that when John Digby came to look into matters, he would discover that the estate had suffered with the rest. At present, however, she could do nothing. She could only stand still and wait. But, as it happened, the waiting was of shorter duration than she anticipated.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### LOSTUN'S RETURN

JOHN LOSTUN returned to England alone. Sarah Chadwick was not well enough to accompany him. But he brought with him any amount of evidence that would assist in establishing his identity. From St. Louis he travelled west to the lonely farmstead where he had spent his childhood and youth, and from old acquaintances and friends he gathered a series of photographs of himself, extending from the one taken by the police authorities when he was a lost child on the streets of St. Louis to the last one taken in New York before he left for England.

He arrived in London early one Saturday afternoon, nearly six weeks after his departure. He had informed no one of the time of his return. He intended to turn up at the office as usual on Monday morning, and go on with his work as long as it was necessary, which he believed would be to the end of the chapter. He took too sane a view of life to imagine that idleness was preferable to activity, or that he would be a happier man if he spent his time and money in pursuing what was usually spoken of as pleasure. He loved his work. He was a mechanic to his finger-tips, and he was always happiest when engaged in some mechanical investigation.

He had come back from America with several new ideas which he was anxious as soon as possible to reduce to practice. He regarded the turn in his fortunes not as an end in itself, but as a means to some greater end. Digby's gold, if wisely used, might find not only remunerative work, but beneficial work for willing hands that to-day were idle.

He found a pile of letters awaiting him; but he did not take the trouble to read them. He did not think any of them would be of the least importance, particularly as halfpenny stamps vastly predominated. He rang for his tea, and while it was being prepared carried his bags upstairs. It was pleasant to be back in London again, and very homelike to be in his own rooms.

He wondered if anything of importance had happened during his absence—if Mary Maxwell had become the wife of David Smart, if Dr. Wilks was still living at Tottenham, if Sophy would hold him to his engagement.

He had received two or three letters from his chief, Mr. Glover, but from no one else. That he knew was his own fault. He had given no permanent address to which they could write. He had sent three or four brief notes to Sophy, but had not asked for a reply. When he and Sophy met, there would have to be some straight talk, and unless she could satisfy him as to the purity and sincerity of her motives, the engagement would have to end, whatever the consequences might be.

He was surprised to find how quickly his discovery had quenched every spark of his affection. He had thought a good deal about Sophy during his absence. Memory gathered up every detail of their intercourse from first to last. He lived over again all the hours he had spent with her during the last seven or eight

months, but it was not a pleasant retrospect on the whole.

Sophy was all right while he believed in her. He was convinced that he had a very real affection for her at one time, though he was equally convinced now that she had never cared for him. But one touch of reality had dispelled all the glamour and turned his affection into something very nearly akin to contempt. During all the weeks of his absence he had never once longed for her smile, never thrilled at the memory of her kiss, and now that he was back in London again he had no desire for her presence. He would be quite content if he never saw her again. He imagined that it was the discovery of her insincerity alone that had wrought the change; but there had<sup>d</sup> been another influence at work which he had done his best to ignore. If he had never seen Mary Maxwell, his affection for Sophy might have survived the strain; but whether he knew it or not, Sophy's hold upon him had weakened from the day he first visited Winterholme.

Mary Maxwell was his ideal. She alone was capable of winning all his love. And now that he was back in London again, he was almost painfully conscious of the fact that the strongest desire he had was to look into her eyes once more. No, he did not want to see Sophy Wilks. Her flippant, empty laugh would grate upon his nerves like a file. But he did want to see Mary Maxwell. She always called into play the best of which he was capable.

Tom Verney bounced in upon him while he was at tea.

"Excuse me, Lostun," he exclaimed, "or I suppose I ought to call you Digby now, but I only heard two seconds ago that you had got back. Allow me to congratulate you, and I do it most sincerely——"

"But how did you know?" Lostun asked, in surprise.

"How did I know? How does everybody know? What are newspapers for? I tell you, when the news was cabled across that you had found David Smart's sister, and all that, there was what the reporters call a sensation. At least, there was in Longhampton."

"But do you mean that my affairs have been cabled across to England?"

"You bet they have. Did you expect the American pressmen were going to miss such a chance? But you have been sly over the business. Fancy my discussing with you the chances of Digby's heir turning up, and you knowing all the while that you were the individual everybody was wanting to see."

"But I did not know at the first. It was not until I read the description given in the papers that I began to suspect. And that was only about three days before I started for America."

"But what did you go to America for at all when you knew a fortune was waiting for you?"

"My dear fellow, old Digby's money is not the only thing in the world that is of importance. Besides, I wanted to have absolute proof that I was the right individual, proof that would not only satisfy me, but satisfy any court of law."

"And you have got it, by all accounts."

"I think so. But now let me know what has happened during my absence."

"You have heard of David Smart's sensational disappearance, of course?"

"Sensational disappearance? No."

"When the news was cabled across that he had got you kidnapped for his own ends he took fright."

"I thought he would have faced it out."



"There were too many other things to face. There's been an awful exposure, I can assure you. He swindled nearly all the brethren at the Temple, and Miss Maxwell is terribly afraid that he has nibbled a considerable hole into Digby's hoard."

"I quite expect he has. The moment I got a clue I saw his game. With only a woman to deal with, he imagined he would be quite secure."

"People are wondering what he has done with all the money. He has not lived extravagantly. He has given a lot to religion and to the missionaries, it is true; but his charities will not account for all he has swindled people out of."

"Been feathering his own nest, I expect. But how is Miss Maxwell taking the exposure?"

"Cheerfully, they say. She is so relieved at not having to marry David Smart, that nothing else seems to her of any importance—at least, that is the Pater's version."

"I cannot understand how she ever promised to marry him."

"Oh, I can, though she says now he fairly hypnotised her. You must remember he was a man of very striking personality. You never heard him preach, I expect? The way he could move an audience was wonderful."

"And has no clue been obtained of his whereabouts?"  
Lostun asked, after a pause.

"Not a single clue, I believe. You see, he got a week's start. Some people think he has escaped to the Continent; others, that he is hiding somewhere in England till the storm blows over, when he will be able to get away unobserved."

"He's a cunning rascal, anyhow."

"A good man spoiled in the making, the Dad

says. But for one fatal twist, he would have been a saint."

Lostun laughed.

"It was a remarkably big twist," he said; "in fact, I am inclined to think he was all twist."

Verney rose to go after a few minutes, but when he reached the door he turned back again.

"By the bye, Lostun," he said seriously, "where did you get those tabloids I got analysed for you?"

"Why?"

"Because there was arsenic enough in them to kill an ox."

"Is that so?"

"It is so. You should be careful about having such things about you."

"I am careful as a rule. What about the stuff in the bottle?"

"Oh, that was comparatively harmless, though if you had swallowed any of it by mistake, it would have made you frightfully ill. How did you get possession of it?"

"Oh, that is a secret of mine. But I am awfully obliged to you for getting it analysed for me."

"You are very welcome. But you should not have poisons knocking about without a label;" and he turned again and made for the door.

"Just what I expected," Lostun said to himself, when the door had closed behind Verney. "Wanted to kill me. Fancied I should be of more value to him dead than alive."

For a long time he nibbled at his bread and butter with an absent look in his eyes, as though his thoughts were far away from Bloomsbury. Then he pulled himself together and finished his tea.

His letters still lay on the sideboard unopened. He

took them up now and began to open them. A receipted bill, two or three circulars, half a dozen requests for subscriptions, and last, a letter in a lady's handwriting.

He tore it open quickly, and his eyes brightened. It was from Mary Maxwell, a simple request that he would come as soon as possible after his return to England.

"Things are in an awful tangle," she wrote. "Mr. Smart has decamped, and I fear taken a good deal of your property with him. I am angry with myself for letting things get so completely into his hands. I fear I have been very foolish. Please come as soon as you can, and relieve me of further responsibility. The worry of it all is getting on my nerves. I am not sure that I can congratulate you. The possession of a lot of money is a great burden. Mother and I will be very pleased to see you again. It is almost like a romance that you should be the real heir.—With all good wishes, yours very sincerely,

"MARY MAXWELL."

"God bless her!" he said to himself impulsively. "She's one in ten thousand." And he folded the letter carefully and tenderly, and thrust it into his breast-pocket. Then he looked at his watch.

"Why not?" he muttered. "She asks me to come as soon as possible. Of course, the thing cannot be settled as easily as she imagines. A lot of legal formalities will have to be gone through. But that's no reason why we should not talk matters over, and it will do me good to look into her eyes once more. Bless her——"

Then his face clouded. What about Sophy Wilks?

They were to be married in a few weeks. Suppose she should hold him to his promise ?

For two or three minutes he paced up and down the room, looking very anxious and perturbed. He had no right to feel elated at the thought of seeing Mary Maxwell. He had very strict notions of honour, and at present he was bound to Sophy Wilks.

He dropped into his easy-chair after a while, and lighted his pipe. He was a little ashamed of himself that he should be so eager to rush away to see Mary Maxwell at her slightest bidding. Surely his duty lay not in the direction of Daveley, but in the direction of Tottenham. Before all things, there must be a clear issue between him and Sophy Wilks.

That Sophy had any idea of her father's treachery was, of course, not to be thought of. Wilks had no doubt been bribed by David Smart, and he was quite prepared to sacrifice his daughter's chance if he could only pocket sufficient of the spoils.

But Sophy herself had plotted to entangle him. He might pity her for some things ; a girl with such a father, and reared in such an atmosphere, was deserving of a good deal of compassion ; but he could not hold her blameless, and before he could advance a single step farther, he must have out all the truth.

It was not without a sigh that he gave up the prospect of seeing Mary Maxwell that evening. The path of right might be steep and thorny, but he would have to follow it resolutely, whatever the issue might be.

The days had grown long, and the sun was still high in the heavens when he started on his journey to Tottenham. He felt curiously nervous when he alighted from a tram-car at the end of Higson's Avenue. The task he had set himself was an unpleasant one

from whatever standpoint he might look at it. He could not help recalling his early visits to Rose Villa, and the thrill of pleasure that ran through his veins as he anticipated Sophy's greeting.

He walked very slowly up the long avenue, as if anxious to postpone the dreaded meeting as long as possible. The thrill that ran through him to-day was not pleasure, but pain. He had reached a new turning-point in his life, and what the future might reveal was by no means clear.

The Digby estates seemed no longer of importance to him. It was not money that made life, after all ; not success in business, not social position, not the applause of one's fellows. A man might have all these things, and yet be a creature to be pitied.

Love was the supreme thing. Love alone could turn earth into an Eden, and beautify and glorify the common things of life.

As he walked slowly along, the long line of cheap villas vanished from before his eyes, and in their place was a house on a hillside surrounded with trees and approached by a winding drive. A girlish figure came dancing down the road to meet him, and a voice of music fell softly on his ear.

He pulled himself up with a start at length. He had reached the familiar gate. No. 239 was staring him in the face. He looked at all the windows before pushing the gate open. The drawing-room blinds were down ; perhaps Sophy was afraid the sunshine would take the colour out of the chintz covering of the chairs and sofa ? He loitered for a second or two between the gate and the door, and looked at the neglected patch of garden in front of the drawing-room window. He even coughed once or twice, hoping to attract Sophy's attention.

At the door he paused again, with the knocker in his hand. He listened for a moment intently, but no sound came from within.

The next moment his loud rat-tat-tat rang through the empty house.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### A PIECE OF NEWS

AFTER waiting several minutes, and no one having opened the door, Lostun knocked again. Then he put his ear to the letter-box and listened, but not a sound came from within.

"Sophy's visiting some of her friends, I expect," he reflected, and he turned toward the gate.

The next moment the door of the adjoining villa was thrown open, and a young woman came out into the small garden. Lostun turned toward her with an inquiring glance, but before he could speak, she said—

"Miss Wilks and her father are away."

"Oh, indeed?" he questioned.

"He has been gone weeks," she continued, lowering her eyes. "Perhaps you are the young gentleman she was engaged to?"

He reddened considerably, and was disposed to turn away without another word, but second thoughts prevailed. Her manner suggested mystery rather than impertinence. This was her method of approaching a subject she wanted to discuss.

"Well?" he questioned shortly, "and what then?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered, with a slight giggle. "It ain't no business of mine, but I'm sorry for you, all the same."

"That is very considerate of you," he said, with a smile. "But why are you sorry?"

"Some young women treat young men shameful," she said, with a blush, "and I don't hold with such ways."

"But please where do I come in?" he questioned, with mock seriousness.

"Everybody understands that you and she were to be married this summer; at least, that's what she told mother. But directly you and Dr. Wilks go abroad on business, she begins carrying on scandalous, having him here to tea every other day or so."

"Having whom here to tea?"

"Why, old Marks, the money-lender. He's always been a bit gone on her, the old skinflint!"

"Well?" he questioned.

"Well, she ain't been at home now for two days, and a report is going the rounds that they've got married on the quiet."

"Got married?" he ejaculated, feeling like a man in a dream.

"So they're saying," she went on. "She told mother a week ago that she was going for a little trip to the seaside—she never told me anything, for we don't speak."

"Oh!"

"Girls are cats—at least some of them are, and she's one. I'd be ashamed to treat my worst enemy as she's treated you and Frank Harley."

"She treated Harley badly, did she?"

"Shameful, I call it, and he as nice a young man as ever walked in shoe-leather. Then she took up with you because she thought you were better off. She was very free with mother, and told her heaps of things."



"Is your mother at home?"

"No, she's out for the afternoon with father. But what mother knows, I know. Sophy Wilks never could keep a thing very long. She said as how you would come into a big fortune later on."

"Then why did she take up with Marks?"

"Oh, well, one doesn't know for certain, but it's easy to guess. The day after her father went away, she told mother she'd half a mind to fling you over."

"Yes?"

"Her father had told her that you'd never come into any fortune; that as far as money was concerned, you were up a gum tree; and that if she took you, she'd have to content herself with small pickings."

"I see. And she was distressed about it?"

"I didn't see her; I never go near her, and she keeps out of our house when I'm at home; but mother says she carried on like a little fool, which, of course, is just what she always was."

"You do not appear to have a very high opinion of her," Lostun remarked drily.

"And you wouldn't either if you knew as much about her as I do. Young men are so easily taken in. They think if a girl has a pretty face she's an angel. They just don't know 'em."

"Very likely you are right," Lostun assented, in the same dry tone.

"But you see, I know what girls are. The wonder to me is that young men look at 'em, especially the simpering dolls who they think are pretty."

"But you are young yourself."

"I hope so. But, thank goodness, I don't make myself cheap, and blab my private affairs to anybody who'll listen."

"You'd rather talk about other people's affairs, eh?" and he laughed cynically.

"No, I wouldn't. I never talk about other people's affairs. I hate gossip. But if it's true Miss Wilks has given you the slip, you ought to know it."

"Quite right, and I'm much obliged for the information."

"Oh, you're welcome. Only understand I'm only telling you what I've heard. It may not be true that she's married old Marks."

"Is Mr. Marks very old?"

"Seventy if he's a day, and as ugly as sin. Fancy any respectable English girl marrying a Jew!"

"Is he rich?"

"I suppose so. Most Jews are. Sophy told mother weeks ago that he'd promised her a motor-car if she'd marry him, and a house in the West End."

"I see! Do you know where Mr. Frank Harley lives?"

"No. 13 Duckett Street."

"Thanks," and he raised his hat and turned toward the gate.

Miss Nora Rose looked distressed. She liked talking to so handsome a young man, especially when so many of her neighbours could see her.

"Shall I show you the way to Duckett Street?" she inquired nervously.

"No, thank you. I can easily find it. Good-evening," and raising his hat again, he hurried away.

Frank Harley looked astonished when Lostun was shown into his presence. He was intent on a book, but rose at once, a hot blush sweeping over his face.

"I have called to inquire if you know anything about Miss Wilks," Lostun said, plunging at once into the heart of his subject.

" You have heard nothing ? " Harley asked, in a low and slightly unsteady voice.

" Well, yes, I have heard certain rumours, but I thought you might be able to supply me with facts."

" You have heard she is married ? "

" Yes."

" It is quite true. She and Isaac Marks were married the day before yesterday by special licence. I wish she had died instead."

" You are quite sure they are married ? "

" Quite. I've made full inquiries. Oh yes, there is no doubt about it. If I could have followed her to the grave I should have been a happier man to-day. I am sorry I troubled you the other evening."

" Don't mention it. You see, I was not your rival after all."

" I could not have believed it of her," Harley said, with a catch in his voice. " She talked flippantly, of course, but I believed that her heart was right. But that she could bring herself to marry old Marks—it is too terrible for words."

" I suppose it was his money that tempted her ? "

" Nothing else. She must loathe him in her heart, and loathe herself also. Oh, Mr. Lostun, it comes hard to have one's faith in womanhood destroyed."

Lostun suggested, " Think of your mother."

" Do you know her ? "

" No, but I've heard of her, and of your devotion to her."

Harley's eyes grew moist in a moment.

" Thank you for that suggestion," he said. " My mother is a saint." So they parted.

Lostun felt strangely excited as he made his way back to town. He almost wondered sometimes whether he was wide awake. The news he heard that

afternoon had changed the world for him. He was making a fresh start with a fresh outlook, and with all the experiences of the past at his command.

What to poor Harley was like the knell of doom was to him the bugle-call of deliverance. Once more he was a free man. The mesh that had been woven round him so silently and deftly had been suddenly broken, and broken by the very hand that wove it. He felt that it was a better fate than he deserved; certainly it was a better fate than he dared hope for.

His fear was that Sophy, having learned through the Press that he was Digby's heir, would hold him to his promise in spite of everything; or, failing that, sue him for breach of promise. Why had she let him slip? Could it be possible that she never read the newspapers, or had her father told her something before he went away which had turned the scale in favour of the money-lender?

He felt like a man who had suddenly and unexpectedly escaped from captivity, and escaped by a lucky fluke. He could take no credit to himself. He knew he didn't deserve the stroke of luck that had come to him. He felt too excited to go indoors when he reached his lodgings, so he took a turn round Russell Square, and then into Bloomsbury Square, and then to Bedford Square. He liked the open spaces, and in the tall trees the throstles were piping with might and main, though it was nearly dark.

He walked slowly, almost unconsciously. New possibilities were opening up before him. New hopes were stirring in his heart. How often during the past months he had returned from Tottenham feeling tired and depressed, conscious that something was lacking, something which—if he could only find it—would make

his life complete. Now the feeling of depression had entirely passed away.

It was bed-time when at last he returned to his lodgings, and after unstrapping his bags and emptying them of their contents, he got quickly into bed. He meant to lie awake for a while, and shape in his mind the course of his future actions. It would be pleasant to dream dreams, and build castles, and weave airy fancies.

Then suddenly the bells began to clang. How annoying it was. Who could indulge in lovely fancies while brazen and discordant notes were clanging through his brain? He turned wearily and opened his eyes. The room was full of light. Could it be possible? He could have sworn he had never slept at all. He looked at his watch. It was after nine o'clock.

He was wide awake now, and feeling as fresh as the spring morning which was steeping the grey city in golden light. He was conscious of a delightful sense of buoyancy as he hurried away to the bathroom to get his morning tub. He was only now beginning to realise how great an incubus Sophy and her father had become to him. Now that the load was lifted, he understood how heavy it had been.

He ate his breakfast that morning with a new relish, and then walked through the quiet streets in the direction of St. Paul's. He was sorry for many things that it was Sunday. He wanted to be doing something, and the enforced inactivity was a little irksome. He would have gone to Daveley if he dared. How much he wanted to see Mary Maxwell he would not confess even to himself.

He stole in under the great dome of St. Paul's and listened to the psalms and anthems with genuine

delight, but he heard nothing else. He tried his best to get interested in the sermon, but it was a fruitless attempt. The preacher might have a message for the rest of the congregation, for him it was only a gabble of words without meaning.

After tea he tried to settle himself down to a pipe and a book, but his pipe went out, and the book vanished from before his eyes. He got up at length and put on his hat.

"I shall have to go to church," he said to himself, "in self-defence. I am afraid there will be no virtue in it, but it will help to while away the time."

He followed the crowd in Holborn through the open doors of a big building, and was accommodated with a camp-stool in one of the aisles. The service passed with amazing quickness. He got interested in the sermon. It was fresh and daring, and spoken with the force of absolute conviction. He did not understand it. It seemed to make mincemeat of a good many of his religious notions. Orthodoxy appeared to be made a football of, and kicked into the street. But he was not sure that he heard aright. The preacher got away out of his reach again and again. Anyhow, his curiosity was aroused, and he resolved to go again.

He was at the office next morning before Mr. Glover arrived, and had quickly picked up the threads of his own department. When Mr. Glover appeared on the scene, he went to him at once, and for an hour no one else was allowed to come into his office.

Mr. Glover appeared to be very well satisfied with the result of Lostun's visit, and readily consented for him to be absent the rest of the day.

"I hope the prospective change in your fortune does not mean that we shall lose your services?" Mr.

Glover said a little anxiously, as Lostun was preparing to leave.

"I hope not, indeed," Lostun answered, with a smile. "I don't see why it should, in any case."

"But if you succeed in proving your claim you will be quite independent."

"But I shall want something to do just the same."

"I hope it may be so. I hope it may be so," Mr. Glover said dubiously.

So they parted.

Half an hour later Lostun found himself closeted with a famous lawyer, to whom he confided the whole case.

The lawyer was interested naturally, but he looked a little disappointed when he discovered that the party in possession did not intend to fight the case. How could lawyers live if there was no litigation? As to the merits of the case, or the right of the case, that was a small matter to the professional eye. Lawyers did not exist for the defence of rights or the ultimate triumph of honesty. People who cherished any such fond delusion had yet a good deal to learn.

By one o'clock Lostun was ready to start for Daveley. He was half disposed to send a wire to Mary to say by what train he would come, but finally concluded that it would be more interesting—perhaps more revealing—to take her by surprise.

He got a hurried lunch at Euston, and then settled himself in a corner of an empty compartment and lighted his pipe. His heart was beating uncomfortably fast, his impatience was getting almost out of bounds.

What he hoped or expected he did not know. He had made no honest attempt to sort out his emotions. He had a vague idea that his only course was

to drift with the tide. To try to probe the future might not only be disappointing, but dangerous. His safest policy would be to do the right thing and wait.

The train stopped at nearly all the stations, and stopped a most unconscionable time. Lostun wondered if there were any other people in the train as impatient as he. He began to speculate at length on the cause or causes of his impatience, but gave up the investigation. He had not the courage to probe his heart very deeply.

It seemed hours since the train started from Euston, but it slowed down at length in Daveley Station. Lostun barely waited for it to stop before he was out on the platform, and, tucking his umbrella under his arm, he hurried away in the direction of Winterholme.



## CHAPTER XXXV

### NEW BARRIERS

HE was almost out of breath when he came in sight of the lodge gates, then he slackened his pace considerably. The trees were in full leaf now, so that the house was almost completely hidden. He passed along the shadowed road, but no one was in sight. The last time he came this way he saw Mary walking in front of him. How well he remembered every curve of her lissom figure. How grateful he would be if his experience could be repeated.

He had almost reached the last curve of the winding drive when Mary came suddenly upon him. She was hurrying down into the village to make some purchases for her mother, and the farthest from her thoughts at the moment was the man who now stood before her.

With a little cry of mingled pleasure and surprise she stood-stock still and waited for him to draw near. Lostun swept her from head to foot with an admiring glance. In her summer attire she looked more beautiful than ever.

Mary was the first to speak, though her surprise was much greater than his.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, reaching out her little, white-gloved hand. "When did you get back?"

"We landed in Liverpool early on Saturday morning. I was up in town soon after noon."

"Then you got my letter?"

"Oh yes; and I would have run down yesterday, but remembered in time that it was the Sabbath."

"Mother disapproves of Sunday travelling very strongly, so I am glad you did not come, though I have been terribly impatient to be rid of all responsibility."

"You will have to bear the burden of it a little longer yet."

"Why so? I do not call in question your claim for a moment. There cannot be the least shadow of a doubt that you are Harry Digby's son. Mother was struck with the likeness when she first saw you."

"And you are not at all sorry?"

"Sorry? Indeed no! I am just boisterously glad. I think I am a bit sorry for you; but being a man, you won't feel the burden of it as I have done."

"I don't know. It is a very unpleasant thing to depose somebody else, especially somebody who—that is, somebody—I mean someone you would like to be kind to."

She laughed in her bright, cheery fashion.

"You will be kind to me," she said, "in lifting from my shoulders all further responsibility."

"You say that because you are generous; but, believe me, I wish you could share old Digby's fortune with me."

"Share it with you?" she said, blushing. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have just as much right to the money as I have," he stammered. "You are as nearly related to him as I am, and if we could cut the fortune in two, and you take one half, and I the other——"

"Not for the world," she interrupted. "No, no! He meant the money for you. His will is very explicit. I was only to come in in case you died before the twenty years had expired."

"But if I were to ask you to share it with me——"

"Hush, hush!" she interrupted. "You must not entertain such a thought for a moment. It is very kind of you, but I shall feel hurt if you allude to such a thing again."

"I would not hurt or offend you for anything," he said slowly; "but try and put yourself in my place for a moment. Think how awkward I shall feel whenever I see you."

"You can get over that by not seeing me," she said, with a gay laugh.

"Is that your wish?" he questioned, with a sudden change in his tone.

"My wish? Oh, I don't know! I have no desire to make you feel uncomfortable."

And all the light of mirth went out of her eyes in a moment.

For a second or two he looked at her without speaking. It seemed as though a shadow had fallen upon the land, and with the shadow a snap of cold.

"Will you not go into the house and talk with mother?" she said, breaking the silence. "I have to run down into the village. But I won't be long."

"May I not walk down with you?" he questioned timidly.

"And climb up this long hill again?"

"Oh, the hill is nothing," he said lightly. "Besides, we can redeem the time by talking."

"As you will," she said, without looking at him. And they walked away together.

For a while neither of them spoke again. Lostun

wondered if he had said anything that had hurt his companion. Had some tone in his voice revealed the truth to her, and set her on her guard? He would have to be careful if he was to win his way into her affections. There was a right way and a wrong way in everything, and clearly the right way was not to offer her a slice of old Digby's fortune.

When Lostun spoke again it was to inquire about the electric plant, and whether all the parts were working satisfactorily.

Then he was led to speak of his trip to America, and she became interested at once. He spoke of the new ideas he had picked up in the shops on the other side, and how he hoped to be able in time to reduce them to practice. He spoke of his visit to the scenes of his boyhood and youth, and of the renewal of old acquaintanceships; and, finally, she led him to speak of his discovery of Sarah Chadwick, and of the confession which she made.

He would have avoided that part of the affair for the moment if he could. He remembered that Mary, wittingly or unwittingly, had promised to marry David Smart, and he felt that it must be very painful to her to discuss his doings. Clearly, however, she had made up her mind to have the matter out, and to shrink from no revelation. If he tried to shunt the subject she would bring him back by a direct question.

They reached the village at length, and he waited outside the shop until she had made her purchases. When she came out the sunshine was on her face again.

"You can hardly imagine," she said, with a smile, "what a relief it is to me to be free once more."

"Your experience has been particularly unfortunate," he said, without looking at her.

"The most painful thing about it is," she went on, "it leaves me without faith."

"Not necessarily, surely?"

"How is one to escape? If a man of the stamp of David Smart fails one, who is to be trusted?"

"Then you think that all men are rogues?"

"Oh no; not by any means. The only trouble is, one can never know; and the very fear of being deceived spoils everything."

"But most men are honest, don't you think, and most women good? The bad ones are the exceptions that prove the rule. Is it not so?"

"One hopes for the best naturally," she said, looking with wistful eyes across the landscape. "But when one's faith has been so completely shattered, it is not an easy task to restore it again."

"And you never doubted David Smart until the blow fell?"

She looked up at him with a startled light in her eyes.

"Why do you ask that question?" she demanded.

"Because I have always had an idea that a woman knew by instinct when a man was to be trusted."

"After I heard the first whispers I did begin to doubt," she said, with downcast eyes.

"But not until then?"

"I do not think so"—and she blushed uncomfortably. "You see, everybody trusted him."

"No, not everybody!"

"At any rate, everybody in my circle. There was no reason why they should doubt him. You see, there were two David Smarts, and the David Smart we knew was a kind, gentle, God-fearing man."

"And you never got a glimpse of the other David?"

"He gave me no opportunity."

"And yet you saw a good deal of him?"

"You would make a good barrister," she said, with an uneasy laugh; "but I don't think we will pursue the subject further."

"I would like, if possible, to strengthen your wavering faith in the general honesty of the male sex."

"It is not worth attempting," she said, half-jocularly, half-seriously; "for it cannot matter in the least to anybody whether or not I believe men are to be trusted."

"You should not say that," he answered gravely. "It may matter a great deal to somebody; and even if it did not, it will matter a great deal to yourself."

"In which way?"

"Life is built upon trust in the main," he went on, in the same grave manner, "whether it be social, or commercial, or domestic. Trust is the great bond of union, and the seed-bed of our highest virtues. He who has no faith in his fellows—who mistrusts everybody because somebody may by chance turn out a rogue—will become a misanthrope, a recluse, a cynic."

"There is truth in what you say, no doubt," she answered thoughtfully; "but, unfortunately, trust is not a matter of will."

"Yet faith, like other plants, will grow if tended; but if it is constantly trampled upon, it will, of course, wither up and die."

"But if the feet of others trample upon it, what then? I had far more faith in men and women two years ago than I have to-day."

"Yes?" he questioned.

"When I became an heiress, as it was presumed, people who never noticed me before began to fawn on me; and when I tried to do good I was deceived

right and left. Oh, the stories of distress I have listened to, and most of them were tissues of lies ! One begins to wonder if anyone is capable of telling the truth."

He laughed frankly, but did not reply.

" You see, I am becoming a cynic," she said, " and a misanthrope, and I expect soon I shall be a recluse. That's what old Digby's money has done for me."

" Then you will be charitable when you see me shrivelling up under its baleful influence ? " he laughed.

" I hope you may be warned by my unhappy fate," she said, her lips breaking into smiles.

" I don't think your case is quite hopeless yet," he said playfully. " With skilful treatment you may quite recover."

" What treatment do you recommend ? " she questioned, arching her eyebrows.

" You might begin by playing the part of good angel to me," he laughed. " Behold me standing in a very slippery place."

They had reached the house by this time and found Mrs. Maxwell waiting for her tea, and much wondering what had become of her daughter. Lostun had no cause for complaint at the nature of his welcome. Mrs. Maxwell was graciousness itself.

" It is good of you," he said, " to receive me in so friendly a fashion, for I can't help feeling that I am more or less of a usurper."

" You are Harry Digby's son," she said. " There can be no doubt of that. You are the very image of your father."

" But having kept out of the way so long," he said, with a laugh, " it is rather too bad to come in and upset everything now."

Mary gave a little shudder.

"You have prevented the continuance of a great wrong," Mrs. Maxwell said, with feeling. "I tremble to think what might have happened."

"I tremble when I remember what has happened," Mary interposed.

"I have heard of the discoveries that have been made in Longhampton," he said quietly.

"But nobody knows if the bottom has been reached yet," Mrs. Maxwell said earnestly. "I confess I am not a little worried about my own affairs."

He looked up with a startled expression in his eyes.

"You see," she went on, "when I bought Winterholme I had to raise a mortgage on it. I was short of the purchase price by two thousand pounds. As the school prospered I paid off the mortgage in sums of five hundred pounds. The last instalment was paid nearly four years ago."

"Well?"

"I don't know where the deeds are. David never gave them back to me. He said he would keep them for me in his strong-room, but we can't find them. They ought to be in my deed-box, but they are not."

"Who was the mortgagee?"

"The Digby Executors."

Lostun gave a low whistle and shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope it is all right, of course," Mrs. Maxwell went on, "but one naturally feels anxious. You ought to lose no time in looking up all the facts and figures."

"I must establish my right first," he said, smiling.

"You will have no difficulty in doing that."

"Not much, I think."

"I hope the money will bring you more peace of



mind than it has brought Mary. I sometimes fear that poor old Robert's curse, as it is called, was more than a mere opinion,"—and she got up from the table and hurried back to the school.

At Mary's request Lostun lighted his pipe, and for the best part of an hour they sat opposite each other talking quietly and earnestly. Conversation roamed over many topics, and as Lostun watched the play of her mobile features, and saw the light flicker and brighten in her deep, expressive eyes, he wondered if he might dare hope to win her. He was free now from entanglements in which he had been meshed by Sophy's cunning and his own guilelessness; free from the disability attaching to a nameless individual, free to make love to her in an honest, straightforward fashion, and yet he could not free himself from the fear that he was as far away from her as ever.

Indeed, he was not sure that a new barrier had not been raised quite as formidable as those that had been swept away. The very thing that made him valuable in Sophy's eyes would discount him in the eyes of Mary Maxwell. He had seen that afternoon how sensitive she was on the question of old Digby's money, and if he attempted to make love to her he felt morally certain she would assume that he wanted to marry her out of compassion.

Here was a prejudice created against him at the very outset. He had told her already that he felt like an usurper—had suggested his willingness to share the fortune with her. From a tactical point of view he had far better have been silent. She would be always suspicious that he wanted to make some kind of atonement. His very generosity—if it were generosity—would be a barrier in his way.

Would it be possible to break down this barrier?

The question haunted him all the time he sat with her. In spite of her sweetness and affability, there was a faint suggestion of reserve that he had never noticed until to-day. All the time she seemed to be on the defensive—never obtrusively so—but the impression was created, and he was unable to throw it off.

When he returned home, she walked with him as far as the lodge gates. If she were conscious of any change of feeling, she seemed determined not to show it, and he was equally determined not to let her see that he imagined there was any change.

They neither of them alluded again to Digby's money. They understood each other quite well, and having made the mistake of offering her half the estate, he was not going to repeat the blunder. The bright June day was drawing to a close when they walked down the hill together in the shadow of the trees. There was plenty of time before the train started, so they did not hurry. Lostun felt in an enchanted land. The thought that he was free from the wiles of Sophy Wilks, free to indulge in a hope that once was impossible, ran like nectar in his veins.

How to prove to Mary Maxwell that she was the one woman in the world he had ever desired to win, he did not know. Perhaps fortune would favour him in some unexpected way. Perhaps her own intuition would lead her to the truth. Anyhow he would try his hardest, and hope on while any ground for hope was left.

"May we hope to see you again soon?" she questioned with naïve ingenuousness, when she shook hands with him at the gate.

"May I hope to see you again soon?" he said. "Perhaps you will be coming up to town."

"No, I think not," she answered, a little wist-

fully. "I intend starting soon on a special course of study."

"You have no more engineering work you would like me to do, I suppose?" he questioned lightly.

"I'm afraid not," she answered, smiling back at him.

He wanted to tell her that he would give all he possessed if he might only come to see her; that one little word from her would be more treasured and more valued than all Robert Digby's gold; but, he knew the time had not come for that. He would have to wait, to possess his soul in patience, to trust in that good Providence which so far had directed his steps.

They parted in the most formal way; but when, from a long way down the lane, he looked back he saw her still standing at the gate.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE REAPING

THREE months later Lostun had taken undisputed possession of Robert Digby's wealth. He had proved to the satisfaction of a Bench of judges that he was beyond all doubt Harry Digby's son, and as no opposition came from any quarter whatever, his course was clear.

He still retained the name of Lostun, adding Digby to it. Lostun was the name around which gathered all the associations of the past. It was the name given him by his foster-parents in lieu of a better. He was the little "lost one" when he came to them first. "Little Johnny Lost'un" they called him playfully, and the name fitted him and stuck to him.

When he went to school the name John Lostun was entered in the books. It was the name under which he exercised his rights as a citizen of the United States; the name under which he studied in one of her Universities. He liked it much better than Digby. It meant so much more to him. It was redolent of sacred memories.

Of his father and mother he knew nothing save such scraps of information as he could pick up from those who remembered them. He tried sometimes to pierce the darkness of those early days, but memory was not equal to the task. Like an unfixed impression

on a sensitised plate the memory of those pre-kidnapping days had almost wholly faded. Bits of the picture might remain—shadowy impressions of an impression—but that was all. No complete or coherent feature could he ever get.

So for the sake of legality he added the name Digby to his own, and on voting lists his name appeared as John Lostun Digby, but to his friends he was always Lostun.

He took up the burden of his possessions without ostentation, and made no change whatever in the manner of his life.

The papers as usual made as much copy out of the affair as they imagined would suit their purpose. That the true state of affairs should reach Sophy's ears was inevitable. Then she purchased several newspapers and read the accounts in secret, shedding tears of much bitterness the while.

Much as she disliked Lostun, he was infinitely to be preferred to the man she had married. Indeed, her feeling for her husband was not one of dislike but of loathing. He soon let her know who was master. The Hebrew conception of a woman is not an exalted one at the best. Her sphere is clearly defined and exceedingly limited. Her inferiority is insisted upon in a hundred little ways, her subjection is one of the commonplaces of history.

Sophy imagined in her foolish little heart that she would be able to twist old Isaac Marks round her thumb, and for the first month after their marriage he let her have pretty much her own way. They went to Paris for their honeymoon, in which city the money-lender managed to combine business with pleasure. Sophy soon got tired of sight-seeing. She had no historical knowledge, no training in art, no apprecia-





"DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE QUITE INSULTING?" SHE CRIED

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tion of form or colour. Hence, the Louvre, she declared, was the dullest place she had ever visited, while the Luxembourg was simply disgusting.

She wanted to return after she had been away a fortnight, so that she might drive in Hyde Park in her motor-car, and receive visitors in her West-end house.

Old Marks kept up the pace for a month, then he flung all pretence aside, and told Sophy what she had to expect.

"But am I not to have my motor-car?" she asked, with blazing eyes.

"What's the use of a motor-car?" he said, with a sneer.

"Why, to ride in, to be sure."

"I can walk yet," he replied doggedly. "Besides, I've no time for such nonsense. I've got to look after the business."

"But I have time," she cried, "and you promised me one."

"Did I? Well, I've grown wiser since then. Do you think I'm going to trust you out in a motor-car?"

"And why not?"

"You'd go alone, of course?"

"If you refused to go with me."

He laughed long and mockingly.

"I was not born yesterday," he said at length. "I know what women are, and you may be quite sure I'm not going to let you go flirting round with young men in a motor-car, or in any other way."

"Do you know you are quite insulting?" she cried, with tears of indignation in her eyes.

"I know I'm your master," he said cynically, "and I know you've got to obey."

"I'll be shot first," she said, and then she



"You'll be horse-whipped if you don't," he said, with a grin, and he walked out of the room and left her.

Sophy's anger and consternation at this revelation were too great for words. For a few days she seemed almost stupefied. Old Marks appeared to have no more human feeling than an Egyptian mummy. Appeals to his sympathy, to his chivalry, to his sense of justice, to his honour as a man, all met with the same response.

Sophy was just a pretty toy, nothing more or less, and when she began to develop a temper he grew tired of her. Toys with wills of their own are apt to be a nuisance.

He knew, of course, that he had made many foolish and extravagant promises when trying to induce her to become his wife, promises that he had never the smallest intention of fulfilling. That, however, did not concern him now. He had lied more or less all his life. He had earned his living by lying. It was part of his business. He had become such an adept in the art that he did not know when he spoke the truth.

Hence when Sophy reminded him of his promises he shrugged his bony shoulders and laughed in her face.

"You promised to love me, you know, little girl. Have you forgotten?"

Her eyes flashed fire at him.

"Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones," he went on. "You keep your promise and love me first, then see what I will do."

"Nobody can even respect you," she snapped, "you behave so hatefully."

"I exercise the right of being master in my own house, that is all," he answered, with a sardonic smile.

"But you promised me that you would take a house in the West End, and that I should have a

motor-car, and drive in the Park, and that I should mix with the best," and Sophy put her handkerchief to her eyes and wept scalding tears.

"I have no use for a motor-car," he answered, "nor for a house in the West End. I have to look after business. Business would go to the dogs if I were not on the spot every day."

"Then you ought not to have promised me," she cried angrily. "It was mean of you, and wicked and detestable."

"And you ought not to have encouraged me, little girl," he said mockingly. "You ought not to have lowered your eyelids so demurely when I looked at you. You ought not to have promised to love me when I asked you——"

"Don't be a fool," she snapped angrily. "I never did promise to love you. I promised to marry you if you would give me certain things, and I accepted your word in good faith."

"And you have married me," he said, with a leer, "and if you are wise, you will make the best of it."

"But why don't you make the best of it? Why do you drive me into rebellion by ill-treating me?"

"I have not ill-treated you," he snarled.

"But you have ill-treated me," she persisted. "You are ill-treating me now. I would rather you horse-whipped me than deny me the things you promised, and the things on which I had set my heart. Do you think I married you to be shut up in this dingy hole all the rest of my life? It's worse than living in Higson's Avenue."

"You'll get used to it," he said, with a leer.

"I shall never get used to it," she cried. "I hate it, and the longer I live the more I shall hate it, and I shall hate you for having deceived me."

"A woman who is deceived by what a man says to her is a fool," he snapped. "Do you think we mean all the rubbish we talk?"

"An Englishman respects his word," she retorted fiercely, "I forgot that you——" but she did not finish the sentence. He rose up in front of her, his face flaming with wrath. Nothing angered him so much as to be reminded of his nationality.

At sight of his anger the words died on her tongue, and she ran sobbing out of the room.

The news that Lostun had come into possession of Digby's wealth was like fuel to the fire of her anger and chagrin. It seemed as if all the fates had conspired to make her miserable. At first she refused to believe it; but when all the newspapers confirmed the story there was no escape for her. For a couple of days she shut herself up in her room and refused to see anyone.

She felt as though everybody had deceived her. There was neither truth nor honesty left in the world. No one was to be trusted or believed. She did not realise that the world was largely the reflection of herself—that she was reaping what she had sown.

For the moment she was more angry with her father than with anyone else. He had deceived her from first to last. He had used her as a pawn in his own game, and then had gone away and left her.

She tried to discover some reason for such conduct, but the problem baffled her. Why should he go first in one direction and then in another? Why plot and scheme to get her to marry Lostun, and then, when she had practically secured him, advise her to give him up; and why was he so anxious to get out of the country before Lostun returned? Evidently there was more in the affair than appeared on the surface.

A few days later she got a letter from her father saying that he intended settling down in the States. Since she was happily married there was nothing now to call him back to London. Moreover, in America there was much more scope for genius than in England, and he saw the chance of winning a great position in a few years.

Sophy cried bitterly over the receipt of this letter. She was utterly forsaken now, left entirely to the tender mercies of Isaac Marks. She had been miserable enough in the old days, and yet those days were happiness itself in comparison with what she endured now. In trying to grasp everything she had lost everything. Little as she respected her father, he seemed almost an angel in comparison with the man she had married. Her father was kind and considerate, and in a way chivalrous, but Isaac Marks was lacking in the most rudimentary instincts of a gentleman. His one aim in life was to make money. Generosity he looked upon as a sign of weakness.

Sophy grew daily more wan and miserable. Now and then her temper flamed up, and bitter and angry words passed between herself and her husband, but his was the stronger will and the stronger personality, and he gradually wore her down. She saw that it was of no use fighting. He had made up his mind to be master in his own house. It was part of his creed. The husband was the head of the wife. It was as much her duty to submit as it was his right to rule. She was practically his property, and he could do what he liked with his own.

It was no consolation to Sophy to remember that she had brought all her misery upon herself—that she was reaping what she had deliberately sown. She had put everything aside for the sake of money—

trampled love in the mire, and broken the heart of the young fellow who would almost have given his life for her. Now she was paying the penalty. She knew she was deserving of no pity, and there was no one left to pity her.

So she kept herself in the main out of sight. When she went out of doors she avoided as much as possible the places where she would be likely to meet her old acquaintances. It would be too humiliating to let them see how terribly she had been deceived, and how cruelly she had been punished.

Now and then Sophy thought of Lostun, and wondered what he was doing and what he thought of her. Most likely he was thankful for his release. That was another bitter drop in her overflowing cup. She had played everybody's game but her own.

Everybody's with one exception. She knew that Frank Harley suffered, and would suffer to the end of his life. "Poor Frank," she would sometimes say to herself, and the hot tears would well from her eyes and roll down her cheeks. Frank's love had been the one refining and ennobling influence that had touched her life, and had she yielded to it she might have become a good woman and a happy woman. It seemed hard that for one folly all her life should be spoiled; and sometimes she would start up as from a terrible nightmare, half wondering if she had dreamed it all.

So the days dragged themselves slowly and painfully away, and as she looked forward into the terrible years that seemed to stretch endlessly into the future, she felt as though the burden of life was too terrible to bear—that either she would die of a broken heart or else go mad.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A LONG SILENCE

**M**EANWHILE Lostun kept away from Winterholme. He had no valid excuse for going, and neither Mary Maxwell nor her mother invited him. How much he pined for a sight of Mary's face he would not confess even to himself, but not a day passed but he hoped he might meet her somewhere in the city.

Fortunately, business kept him busy from dawn to dark, and he had little time to think of anything else. When he was not engrossed in engineering problems he was deep in the tangle left by David Smart.

As he expected, David had eaten a considerable hole into the estate, though not as great as he had feared. Until the last few years he had managed everything with economy and efficiency. While his co-executors remained alive everything was carefully checked and docketed. But when Mr. Dixon went over to the great majority, and everything was left in David's hands, he began at once in a small way to anticipate the future.

One of the first frauds, Lostun discovered, was practised, singularly enough, not on the estate, but on Mrs. Maxwell. The mortgage deeds were discovered intact, but there was no evidence that a penny had been paid toward the reduction of the mortgage.

Legally it appeared she was still owing the estate the original amount that had been lent.

Lostun at once packed up the deeds and forwarded them to her in a registered parcel, with a brief note which committed him to nothing. He was strongly tempted to go himself and take the deeds with him. It was the only excuse that had come his way, and he might not get another. But he was afraid that Mary or Mrs. Maxwell would subject him to a cross-examination, and he was not good at evasions. To have told Mrs. Maxwell that Smart had pocketed the money instead of paying off the mortgage would have filled her with dismay, and she would never have rested until she had paid it all a second time.

Lostun was resolved that neither Mary nor her mother should ever know the truth. It was the only way that so far had appeared by which he could show them kindness without being misunderstood. That they had the smallest claim on the estate, legal or moral, neither of them would admit, and the least suggestion that they would share with him the miser's hoard would, he knew, only widen the gulf between them.

He had to walk very warily. He had no wish to earn Mary's gratitude, but he did desire above all things to win her confidence. Until she trusted him she could never love him. Sometimes he wondered whether he was doing the wisest thing in keeping away from Winterholme. If love were a matter of propinquity, as some people said it was, then what chance was there of Mary loving him if she never saw him?

On the whole, however, he was pretty well satisfied that he would lose nothing in the long run by keeping out of sight. Mary would need time to recover from the disgust created by the conduct of David Smart,

and in the second place any attempt at lovemaking on his part would be most certainly misunderstood, and he was afraid he could not be very much in her company without attempting to play the part of lover.

It went terribly against the grain to keep away day after day and week after week. He almost prayed that something would go wrong with the electrical plant, so that Mary would be compelled to write to him; but evidently the plant remained in perfect working order. He got a nice little letter from Mrs. Maxwell acknowledging the receipt of the deeds, and thanking him for his promptitude, but she did not invite him to Winterholme, and there was no allusion to Mary.

Had Lostun been less full-handed he might have chafed at the barrier of silence that had risen up between them, but his brain was full of large business schemes which he was anxious to put in operation as soon as possible.

The English branch of Cleveland, Glover & Co. was little more than an agency up to the present. Nearly everything they supplied was made in their American shops and shipped across. This of necessity entailed considerable delay, and sometimes considerable loss. If they could have their own workshops on the English side, with the most modern plant, they would be able to do a far greater volume of business than they had ever done.

As soon as Lostun understood the extent of his fortune, he approached his chief on the subject. He had so much faith in Cleveland, Glover & Co. that he was prepared to invest a big slice of his fortune in the concern, providing satisfactory arrangements could be made:



"Well, what do you suggest?" Mr. Glover questioned, looking up with an interested light in his eyes.

"The building of suitable workshops on this side," Lostun answered promptly.

"In London?"

"Oh no, land is too dear, and living too expensive; but I have in my mind an ideal place."

"And where is that?"

"Longhampton. There is plenty of land to be had, and plenty of labour. The railway facilities are excellent, and it is sufficiently near London to answer every purpose."

Mr. Glover rubbed his nose and smiled.

"You have, I suppose, no—well—that is no sentimental reason for favouring Longhampton?" he questioned.

"But I have," Lostun answered frankly and promptly. "My distant relative, who was considerate enough to leave me his fortune, made all his money in Longhampton, and it seems to me a very proper thing that the money should be employed there for the benefit of the people."

Mr. Glover rubbed his nose and smiled again.

"The suggestion, my dear Lostun, does credit to your heart at any rate. I will say nothing about your head. Only it is always well to distinguish clearly between business and philanthropy."

"I am trying to do that," Lostun answered, with a smile. "I am afraid there is not much fear of my philanthropic instincts running away with me. The danger is in the opposite direction."

"But you admitted just now to a sentimental reason in favour of Longhampton."

"Nevertheless the sentiment is entirely secondary.

Come and spy out the land for yourself, and judge the question from a purely commercial standpoint."

Mr. Glover cabled the proposal to Mr. Cleveland, and later in the day journeyed down to Longhampton and spent the long afternoon in looking at various suggested sites.

A week later Mr. Cleveland arrived in London. He was not the man to let grass grow under his feet if there was any chance of extending his business. Lostun's proposal had struck him as eminently practical, and if there was money in it, why let the chance slip and give place to someone else?

He hunted up his partner directly on his arrival in London, and by the following morning they had elaborated a working scheme.

Lostun was surprised on getting down to the office next morning to learn that not only had Mr. Glover been in his room some considerable time, but that Mr. Cleveland was with him, having arrived in London the previous evening. Lostun had scarcely time to hang up his hat before he was sent for, and a few minutes later was discussing the details of a working partnership. It was a new experience to Lostun, and one that taxed all his ingenuity. He did not distrust his chiefs. During the years he had been with them he had found them absolutely straightforward, and yet it seemed to him that neither of them saw clearly his side of the question, and saw it whole. Perhaps it was just as true of him that he did not see fully their side of the question. Perhaps it was natural that they should over-estimate the value of what they had done, and equally natural that he should over-estimate the value of what he believed he would be able to do.

By the end of the day they had reached a basis of

agreement, and the next day the lawyers were consulted and set to work. A week later the firm was advertised as Cleveland, Glover, Digby & Co., and a week or two later operations were commenced just outside Longhampton for the erection of new works.

Longhampton was naturally very considerably excited. Lostun was welcomed everywhere with enthusiasm. The local Press contained not only glowing descriptions of the man, but of the work he meant to do. The Mayor, in a public speech, declared that to find work for willing hands was much better than charity, a sentiment that was received with great applause, and was quoted for weeks after as a gem of purest wisdom.

Mary Maxwell read the local papers with great diligence, and applauded in her heart all the kind things that were said of Lostun, but she felt a little resentful nevertheless at his long neglect. She thought he might come to see them now and then, if only for old acquaintance' sake. Yet there were odd moments when she tried to persuade herself that she was thankful he kept away. She was conscious of a curious little flutter in the region of her heart when she read anything in the papers in praise of his life or achievements, and it was during such moments she concluded that it was well for her peace of mind that they did not meet.

But the human heart is essentially contradictory. Scarcely a day passed but she looked along the road toward the station and wondered if he would come.

June passed away, and July, and early in August—the school having closed for the summer vacation—she and her mother took a little trip abroad. They loitered through Belgium and along the banks of the Rhine. They spent a few days among the snow

mountains of Switzerland, and returned home by way of Paris. In London they did a considerable amount of shopping, and spent several days in doing it, but they did not meet John Lostun. He was either in the City or down in Longhampton superintending operations. They stayed at a quiet hotel in Bloomsbury, not far from where Lostun lodged. Mary thought they would be almost certain to meet him sooner or later, but as the fates would have it he did not cross their path, and had no idea that they were in town.

"Has Mr. Lostun Digby called?" was one of her first questions when she got back to Winterholme, but the housekeeper was quite emphatic that he had not been near.

Mary sighed a little disappointedly when she went to her room. It was humbling to be so completely ignored. She wondered what the reason was. He had always been very friendly, and during his last visit he had shown himself to be frankly generous—so generous indeed that she had rather hotly resented it.

Had he taken offence? Did he think he was not wanted? Had he become so absorbed in business that she had passed completely out of his life?

Her mother alluded to the subject one evening over dinner.

"It does seem strange, Mary, that he never comes near us," she said in rather hurt tones.

"Forgotten our existence, I suppose," she answered, without looking up from her plate.

"And yet we are practically the only relatives he has."

"The relationship is so distant that it does not count."

"Perhaps he is sensitive at having taken your

place, as it were. Don't you think I ought to invite him over for a week-end ? ”

“ I don't think so, mother. A formal invitation might be misunderstood. If you met him in the street and gave him a kind of informal invitation it would be different.”

“ Do you know, I used to think he liked to come here, and he was always ready to stay to lunch.”

“ You see there was no danger of misunderstandings in those days,” she said, with a smile. “ Now that he is a rich man he may have become suspicious.”

“ Suspicious of what ? ” Mrs. Maxwell asked, looking up sharply.

“ Oh, nothing in particular,” Mary answered, with a quick rush of colour to her face.

“ You imagine he might think you——”

“ I imagine nothing,” Mary interrupted, with a laugh. “ If he chooses to ignore us, let him.”

Mrs. Maxwell dropped the subject at once, but she was none the less piqued that Lostun so persistently avoided them.

Mary found herself growing suspicious and resentful. There was a reason for everything, and there was a reason somewhere why Lostun never darkened the door of Winterholme. Was he afraid to come ? Did the fact that she was no longer engaged to David Smart influence him ? Did he fear that she might, in vulgar parlance, set her cap at him ?

“ He need have no concern,” she said to herself indignantly. “ I neither want him nor any share of old Digby's money.”

And yet, curiously enough, Lostun's very indifference—or what seemed indifference—increased her regard for him. The less he appeared to think about her, the more she thought about him. It is part of

the contradictoriness of human nature to desire most the things that are out of reach. Directly they come within reach they lose half their value.

Mary found herself constantly magnifying Lostun's excellences and contrasting him with other young men of her acquaintance. In this she was assisted by continual references to him in the Longhampton Press. After months of abuse of David Smart it was a relief to indulge in adjectives of a different order. For months a considerable section of Longhampton had been under a cloud. The villainy of David Smart had cast a shadow over the whole community. Confidence had been destroyed in more instances than could be counted, and religious and philanthropic work had received a check from which it seemed unable to recover.

But the coming of Lostun was like an April breeze. It broke up the heavy masses of cloud, and scattered them right and left. The sun came through once more, and the buds lifted up their heads and burst into flower. The opening of new works brought hope and courage into scores of workmen's homes, and tradesmen looked cheerful at the prospect of an increase of business.

So it happened that Lostun was praised by everybody, and as both political parties claimed him on the grounds that he had never been heard to express any political opinion whatever, nobody took the trouble to hunt up any gossip that might in the remotest degree reflect on his character.

Mary sometimes wondered if Lostun was deserving of all the praise he got, and yet she was compelled to admit to herself that she liked to hear him praised. She only hoped that in the rebound from the bitter feeling caused by Smart's villainy, they would not carry their admiration of him too far.

One evening Mrs. Maxwell returned from a visit to Longhampton mildly but very genuinely excited.

"I have seen an old friend of yours," she said, trying to speak indifferently.

"An old friend of mine?"

"And he inquired particularly after you."

"Indeed?"

"He is coming to see us soon, and really he looks remarkably well."

"Who are you referring to?" Mary asked, looking a little puzzled.

"Can't you guess?"

"I might if I tried very hard, but it is too much effort."

"Then you give it up?"

"Yes."

"John Lostun Digby."

"Oh, indeed."

"He was exceedingly nice, and most particular in his inquiries after you."

"Did he apologise for not calling during all these long months?"

"Well, not exactly. He made me feel somehow as though the fault were ours."

"Why, what did he say?"

"Well, he said nothing definite, but somehow he conveyed that impression. When I asked him if he would not come and spend a week-end with us he jumped at the idea."

"You did not convey the impression to him, I hope, that we had worried about the matter?"

"Oh no, I don't think so. But really he was exceedingly friendly and nice. And isn't it very noble of him to use old Digby's money to such good purpose?"

“ Oh, I don't know. He wants to make more money, I expect.”

“ Is that quite just to him, do you think, Mary ? ”

“ Why not ? Everybody is tumbling over his neighbour nowadays in his haste to get rich, and why should Lostun be different from other people ? ”

“ There's no harm, surely, in getting rich, so long as it is done honestly,” Mrs. Maxwell said in a tone of mild rebuke.

“ Perhaps not,” she answered slowly, as if she had no wish to argue the question out just then. “ But when is Lostun coming ? ”

“ On Saturday next. He said he would come here in time for lunch if we wouldn't mind.”

“ And you said we would be delighted, of course ? ”

“ I did, Mary. What else could I say ? ”

Mary laughed and turned away her head, for she felt the warm colour stealing unbidden to her cheeks, and she knew her eyes were sparkling with unusual brilliancy.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### COUSINS

LOSTUN hoped that Mary would come to meet him, and looked eagerly for her at the station. On the way up to Winterholme he expected at every turn of the road to come face to face with her. He walked slowly, though with fast-beating heart, for he felt as though all the future of his life hinged on this visit.

Mary, however, did not come to meet him. Neither was she in the hall to give him welcome. Mrs. Maxwell showed him to his room, and explained that they would have lunch at one o'clock. Lostun sat down by the window and looked out over the grounds. He was conscious of an acute sense of disappointment. He feared that Mary had been no party to the invitation, and that she was not particularly pleased he had come, and if that surmise were true, he might give up the hope of getting any pleasure out of the visit.

The gong went at length, and he wended his way slowly downstairs. At the dining-room door Mary met him, radiant and beautiful, and, as he thought, exquisitely dressed.

"I beg pardon for my late welcome," she said, with a smile, "but to tell you the truth I was deep in the mysteries of a cooking experiment when you arrived."

"How very interesting," he said, with a laugh. "Are we to have the results for lunch?"

"I fear not," she answered, glancing shyly up into his face. "To be candid, the experiment was not quite satisfactory."

"What a shame," he replied in a reproachful tone. "I feel already as though I had been cheated out of my due."

"You don't know what perils you have escaped," she said, laughing. "Some of the dishes I have manufactured have been simply appalling."

"No, no, I can't believe that," he insisted. "The judges must have been prejudiced."

Then he took his seat at Mrs. Maxwell's right hand, while Mary sat opposite. The momentary fit of depression passed away entirely. Mary was as bright and vivacious as he had ever known her.

After lunch, coffee was brought to them on the lawn. Lostun settled himself in the curve of a deck-chair in the eye of the sun, and he smoked to his heart's content. Mary sat in a folding-chair a couple of yards away, and entertained him with an account of their holiday travels.

This, however, was only preliminary. Her object was to get him to talk about himself, and about his work, and in this she succeeded admirably. Lostun looked at her every now and then through half-closed eyes, and wondered if he had any chance of winning her.

He told her without reserve all his plans for the future. He felt that she had a right to know, and the keen and interested way in which she entered into all his schemes, made the mere telling a delight.

Later in the afternoon they took a long ramble together across the fields and through quiet country

lanes, and got back in time for a late tea, both tired and thirsty.

When Lostun got to bed that night he lay awake for a long time reviewing the afternoon. It seemed almost like a page out of a story-book. There was only one thing needed to make it perfect. The sunshine was there, and the blue skies, and the quiet, restful country and the rich foliage—untouched as yet by autumn brown—and the singing of birds, and a youth and maiden walking side by side discussing eagerly great schemes for the future. The only thing lacking was the assurance of love on the part of the maiden.

That he loved her he had no doubt. It was the one thing in the world he was absolutely certain of. It was the absorbing passion of his life. While he was bound to Sophy he kept himself well in hand. He had no right to love her, and he refused to come to close grips with his own heart. The fire of his love was slacked up, and all the dampers were in. It smouldered and smouldered and glowed red at the centre, but there was no flame. It might in time have died down into dull grey ashes. Who can tell? But when Sophy gave herself to another, and he knew he was free, the air was let into the fire, the dampers were drawn out, and all the elements of combustion were given free play.

Outwardly he made little sign. He was a man, and a strong man, with an immense reserve of will power, and yet the very effort to keep himself in hand exhausted him more than he knew. His love was no boyish fancy, no fleeting passion awakened by a youthful and beautiful face. It was life itself, the focusing of reverence, of admiration, of idolatry even, into one burning spot.

Throughout the whole of that afternoon he watched and waited for any sign that Mary cared for him beyond that of a friend, but no such sign was given. She was good-nature itself, the sweetest of comrades and friends, but she defined very clearly the boundary beyond which he could not go.

He did not give up hope, however. He reflected that what was easily won was often not worth winning. Men valued most what was the outcome of long and determined effort. He was prepared to wait any reasonable length of time, prepared to prove his devotion in any way she might desire. And yet he would not be content with mere liking on her part. To win her consent to marry him would not be enough. He hungered for her love, and unless she loved him with a love akin to his own, he knew that it would be infinitely better that they should for ever remain apart.

Lostun made up his mind that if he could not win Mary's love he would not win her at all. No half-hearted affection would satisfy him. Marriage would be sacrilege unless she loved him as he loved her.

He felt despondent before he fell asleep. How was it possible that Mary could ever love him as he loved her? She had every charm—grace and sweetness and beauty—while he was just an ordinary humdrum man without attractions of any kind. It seemed presumption to think of her at all.

The Maxwells were cosmopolitan in their religious views. They usually went to the Parish Church—which was a mile and a half away—in the morning, and to the Congregational Church—which was in the village—in the evening.

Lostun said he would fall in with their usual custom, whatever it might be. So long as he was with Mary

he cared not where he went. Perhaps he enjoyed the evening's service most, because he and Mary went alone, Mrs. Maxwell having decided at the last minute—because it threatened rain—that she would not go.

Lostun sat very still and thoughtful by Mary's side, scarcely daring to lift his eyes to her face during the whole of the service, and yet her presence seemed to steep all his senses in a powerful narcotic. Nothing mattered while she was near. No storm could ruffle the delicious calm in which he for the moment dwelt. She filled his soul with a quiet ecstasy. He wondered if she knew—if she was conscious of the subtle magnetism that went out from her to him, of the unspoken communion of soul, or was he only as a log by her side?

They sat close together, for there were other people in the pew. He could feel the warmth of her arm against his own, feel almost the rising and falling of her bosom. Her eyes were fixed steadily on the preacher; her attention never relaxed for a moment. Was she so profoundly interested in the sermon? Did no chance word of the preacher send her thoughts galloping along unexpected channels? For himself, he could only listen a moment or two at a time. His thoughts always came back to the point from which they started. His love for this beautiful woman was the most wonderful thing in his life, the most absorbing, the most uplifting. It dominated him as nothing had ever done before. It changed the face of the earth.

She never once looked at him, she appeared to be quite unconscious of his presence. The love evidently was all on his side. She had not even a glance to give in return.

The twilight was deepening rapidly as they walked home together. They discussed the sermon and the singing, the organ and the organist, the minister's wife, the senior deacon and the people who sat in their pew. Mary was bright, vivacious, talkative. Conversation was not allowed to flag for a moment. If one subject dropped, she quickly introduced another. She appeared anxious to avoid all awkward pauses.

Lostun accommodated himself to her mood as well as he was able. He interpreted her heart by her words. She kept away from everything bordering on sentiment. The love that was consuming him clearly found no response in her.

He wanted to extend their walk, but she excused herself on the ground that her mother was at home alone. After an early supper Mary entertained him with selections from Bach and Beethoven and Brahms. Music was one of her special gifts. Lostun listened with closed eyes and a quickly beating heart. He never realised so fully before how much music could express.

The evening was like a pleasant dream, but a dream not unmingled with pain. There seemed to him to be something wrong in the universal order, when a love so mighty and overmastering as his awoke no response in the heart of the woman he loved.

He took his leave early next morning. Mrs. Maxwell wanted him to promise to come again soon. Mary, however, said nothing. Lostun looked at her, but she did not meet his eyes.

"It will be quite easy for you to run over here when you are at Longhampton," Mrs. Maxwell said. "And then you know we are really your only relatives."

"It is very kind of you," Lostun answered, speaking more cheerfully than he felt. "I should like to come

very much," and he looked again at Mary, but she was interested in something on the other side of the room.

"You must feel awfully lonely in lodgings," Mrs. Maxwell went on, "and we've a spare bed here that you can have any time when you are in the neighbourhood."

"Please don't tempt me too far, or you may regret having such a relation," he laughed; "if I were to get into the habit of coming to Winterholme—well, you know how strong habits become."

"It would be rather nice," Mrs. Maxwell said, with a genial smile. "Don't you think so, Mary?"

"Were you speaking to me, mother?" Mary questioned, turning her head slowly.

"I was telling Mr.—Mr.—Digby——"

"Why don't you call me Jack?" Lostun broke in impulsively. "I'm related to you, you know. Miles and miles away, it is true. Still, I *am* related, and if you'll call me Jack, I'll call you—well?"

"Cousin Grace," Mary interjected.

"May I?" Lostun questioned, looking a little confused.

"If you like," Mrs. Maxwell answered, with a very becoming blush. "But I fear it won't be easy to call you Jack."

"Why not? It's a very simple name, and slips easily from the tongue."

"But you are a man of very great importance now, you know."

"Not to you, surely. I'm just a working engineer, nothing more or less."

"Oh yes, you are a member of a great firm, and very rich besides."

Lostun laughed.

“ Did you think more of your daughter when she was the heiress ? ” he questioned.

“ I believe most people did,” was the evasive answer.

“ But she didn’t think any better of herself,” Mary interposed.

“ And she doesn’t think any the better of me now that I’ve slipped into her place,” Lostun said, looking hard at her.

“ Why should she ? ” Mary answered, without meeting his glance. “ Money spoils most people.”

“ And you think it will spoil me—that is, if I am not too completely spoiled already ? ”

“ I don’t remember saying so,” she answered, laughing. So they parted.

Mrs. Maxwell went with him as far as the lodge gates, and when they parted he called her Cousin Grace, and she called him Jack.

Mary was standing in the porch when her mother returned, looking dreamily out across the wide landscape which was bathed in the pale light of the morning sun.

“ Our cousin is really a splendid fellow,” Mrs. Maxwell remarked casually as she stood on the doorstep. “ It is a comfort to think the money has not gone to a wastrel.”

“ He seems to be using it to good purpose,” Mary answered indifferently.

“ It will make a lot of difference to Longhampton,” was the reply. “ They say business has begun to look up already.”

For a moment or two there was silence. Then Mrs. Maxwell said, as she passed into the house—

“ He has promised to come again on Saturday week.”

Mary stood quite still looking out across the wide



landscape, but in reality seeing nothing. She was wondering whether she would not be better pleased, and whether it would not be better all round, if Lostun had been ugly and narrow-minded, and disagreeable and unlovable.

She was conscious of a growing admiration for him—to use no stronger word—and the knowledge was disquieting, to say the least of it. His very strength seemed to draw her like a magnet. His presence in the house changed the entire atmosphere of the place. His voice woke strange music in her heart.

She felt that her mother had not acted with her usual judgment and caution in getting him to promise to come again—but then, of course, her mother did not know.

Lostun went to Longhampton first, and returned to town by a later train. He was not by any means in his most optimistic mood. He very much doubted whether he had done wisely in promising to spend another week-end at Winterholme. Mary was very clearly on the defensive. Perhaps, with a woman's intuition, she had read his feelings, and wanted to save him further pain. That would be just like her. She was the very soul of kindness and good-nature.

By going to Winterholme he made his battle all the harder. It taxed his strength to the utmost to be with her and not tell her how much he loved her. And yet to speak of love while she neither by word, nor look, nor tone, gave him the slightest encouragement would be simple madness. Girls were not to be won that way. So he believed.

Being a young man, and a young man of studious habits, his knowledge of women was necessarily small. His intercourse with Sophy Wilks had convinced

him that there were a hundred little ways in which a girl could show her liking, any one of which she could adopt with perfect propriety, and without trespassing on her maidenly modesty and reserve in the smallest degree.

That being so, he was quite convinced that Mary Maxwell had no liking to reveal. She did not even second her mother's invitation, which would have been a very simple and easy thing for her to do.

During the next fortnight he stuck to business more closely than ever. Work seemed his best and most effective solace. If he could not forget Mary altogether, he could keep her out of his thoughts during the greater part of each day.

He did not go to lunch on his next visit. He strolled slowly up the hill a little before tea-time.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### CROSS PURPOSES

LOSTUN had primed himself with quite a number of good resolutions. He would be very circumspect. He would carefully hide every trace of affection. He would avoid all turns in conversation that might tempt him to say more than he ought. He would not ask Mary to go for long walks into the country. Since she had been so considerate of his feelings, he would be equally considerate of hers. He would base their friendship on other grounds than those of affection. He would accept the inevitable and play the man.

This did not mean, however, that he would give up all hope. Time was on his side. Her feelings might undergo a change. There was a bare possibility that when she got to know him better she would like him better. Women sometimes took strange and unexpected fancies. The only consistent thing about them was that they were inconsistent.

No one could accuse Lostun of being a vain man—especially where personal charm was concerned. He had always felt that he was not a ladies' man. He had been reared in the backwoods and educated in a rough and unconventional school. He did not know what Society was, and he had no desire to know. He believed that any ordinary clerk or draper's

assistant would cut a better figure in a drawing-room than he. He was not built along the lines of easy adaptability, and he hated the finnickish flummery which appeared to be the stock-in-trade of so many young men he had met.

Hence he felt that he was bound to be discounted in the estimation of women. They were such worshippers of correctness. They could tell in a moment if a man's necktie matched his hair, or if his fancy vest harmonised with his complexion. He had never been a student of such things, and it was doubtful now if any amount of coaching would render him decently passable.

He had yet to learn that what a woman chiefly admired in a man was manliness, and though she might be the slave of convention herself, she rather gloried in the individual who had strength and courage enough to kick convention into the ditch and stride along his own independent way.

Lostun had sense enough and courage enough to be natural. He could not be vulgar if he tried, and so it happened that without training in any conventional school he was a gentleman.

In this topsy-turvy world the sure way not to get a thing is to expect it, and anticipate it. The good things that come to us are in the main unlooked for. A watched kettle, 'tis said, never boils. If Lostun had expected Mary to come and meet him, the chances are a hundred to one she would have remained in the house. But just because he didn't expect her, and was not prepared for the encounter, she almost ran into his arms.

"Oh, won't you turn back to the village with me?" she said, laughing and blushing; "I want to send off a telegram, and I'm in a hurry."

"I'd go with you to the ends of the earth," he exclaimed impulsively, then he stopped and looked foolish. He had said the very thing he ought not to have said, committed the very indiscretion he had resolved to avoid.

"I would not like to tax your good-nature so much," she said, the smile fading quickly from her face. "And I'm sure you must be very tired."

He adroitly turned the conversation.

"It seems a pity to be indoors on a day like this. Don't you think so?" he questioned.

"The weather is lovely;" and she looked toward the village.

He took the first step down the hill. He was not going to be cheated. Mary was quickly by his side, and they talked about nothing in particular until they reached the post-office.

Lostun waited outside while she sent off the telegram, and meditated on his lack of tact. He ought to have been more on his guard. It was foolish to let out so much of the truth without warning. He expected she would be on her guard now for the rest of his visit.

On the other hand, he could not go on playing a waiting game to the end of the chapter. She had known him now more or less intimately for nearly a year, and must surely know whether she liked him or disliked him. On second thoughts, he was not sure whether it would not be better to bring the matter to a head without further delay.

There was no shadow on her face when she came out of the post-office. She looked the daintiest bit of womanhood he had ever seen. Directly they turned their steps toward Winterholme she began to question him respecting the progress of the new

works at Longhampton, and she kept him talking on the same subject until they reached the house.

During the evening she left him to be entertained in the main by her mother. He could not understand why she should be so frightfully busy. The school did not open for another week, and there appeared to be plenty of servants in the house to do all that was necessary to be done. He concluded after a while that she was deliberately keeping out of his way, and this view was further confirmed next morning when she excused herself from going to church.

"I've made an ass of myself," was his unflattering reflection as he walked away to church with Mrs. Maxwell. He tried to be cheerful and entertaining, but his heart was in a condition the very opposite of Sabbath calm.

During the afternoon matters grew worse from his point of view. Mary complained of a headache and went to lie down. Mrs. Maxwell nodded over a book, so he jammed on his hat and went for a long walk alone.

On his return he encountered Mary in the grounds, looking as well as he had ever seen her. She looked up with a glance of surprise.

"I did not hear you," she said. "Did you come across the lawn?"

"I think so. I made a bee-line for the house from the opposite hill."

"I hope you have enjoyed your walk," she said hesitatingly.

"No! I have not enjoyed it at all."

"No? I am sorry," and the colour deepened on her cheeks. There was a tone in his voice that she had never heard before.

"Don't say you are sorry," he said impatiently. "You know you are not."

"But I am sorry," she repeated in a tone of surprise.

"Sorry, that I came, no doubt. I am sorry also. But I did not know you disliked me so much. I promise not to worry you with my presence again."

"Now you are unkind," she said, all the colour fading from her cheeks.

"Why am I unkind? I am studying you. Since I came last night you have deliberately shunned me. I do not forget either that when your mother invited me a fortnight ago you studiously avoided seconding the invitation. I am driven therefore to the conclusion that my presence is obnoxious to you."

"In that you are altogether wrong," she said earnestly. "Your presence is not obnoxious in the least. How can you suggest such a thing? Both mother and I admire you immensely."

"Why drag your mother into the question?" he said resolutely. Now that he had begun he was determined to carry the business through. He had reached the parting of the ways at last. The time of temporising was over. The truth would have to come out. "I have no complaint to make against your mother," he went on. "She has been friendliness itself. My contention is with you."

"But what have I done?" she questioned, with trembling lip.

"You have avoided me—deliberately and intentionally—and you know it."

"Well?" she questioned slowly, with downcast eyes, "that does not prove dislike, or even unfriendliness."

"Will you tell me what it does prove?" he asked severely.

"I don't think I am called upon to answer any and every question you choose to ask me," she said, with spirit.

"Anyhow you have admitted my contention," he said after a pause. "That is sufficient. Of course I am sorry—be the cause what it may—that you feel it necessary to avoid me, but that being so there is only one course open to me."

"You mean you will stay away from Winterholme?"

"What else can I do?" he questioned.

The tears welled up into her eyes in a moment.

"I promise not to avoid you again," she said haltingly. "Perhaps I did wrong. I have been greatly perplexed."

"Perplexed?" he questioned. "Were you afraid I should make love to you?"

"No, I was not afraid you would make love to me," she answered, laying emphasis on the word love.

"But I know how generous you are, and how you feel respecting Robert Digby's money."

"In other words, you were afraid I might ask you to marry me?"

"No girl ought to be asked to give all her reasons for what she does," was the evasive reply. "But you are very impulsive sometimes—you will excuse me for saying so—won't you? While your generosity might carry you so far that you would regret it later on."

For a while there was silence, and when he spoke again all trace of annoyance had gone out of his voice.

"I am glad we have raised this issue," he said slowly and quietly. "It was bound to be reached sooner or later. I don't deny that I have desired above all things on earth to make you my wife. I desire it still——"

"But you know it is quite impossible," she interposed, with trembling lips.



"If you say it is impossible," he went on quietly, "if you are absolutely sure you can never love me, then I suppose I must bow to the inevitable."

"I would have saved you from this confession if I could," she answered, glancing timidly up into his face, and then as quickly withdrawing her eyes. "I know how kind you are, and I appreciate the generosity that has prompted the proposal."

"Generosity!" he cried. "I do not know what you mean."

"You want to marry me because you would like me to share with you Robert Digby's fortune—I can appreciate the feeling to the full, and I honour you for being so ready to make the sacrifice. But no one shall marry me out of pity, or from any mistaken sense of justice."

"And you think so ill of me as that?" he questioned after a long pause.

"Ill of you? I think it is very brave of you, very courageous, very self-denying."

He laughed bitterly, and turned on his heel and walked away two or three paces, then came back again. "Love," he said, "is built on respect and reverence. While you think I am capable of playing such a part as you have indicated, love is of course out of the question."

"Have I not praised you for your generosity?" she asked quickly,

"I do not want praise for virtues I do not possess," he said impatiently. "I love you. Is not that enough? Love you with all the passion and all the selfishness of love. I have loved you——"

"Please don't," she interrupted tearfully. "David Smart spoke to me once in similar strains."

For a moment his eyes blazed fiercely.

"Do you class me with a man of that type?" he asked, with suppressed passion.

"Pardon me," she replied, quickly and brokenly. "I did not mean to hurt you, and I intended no reflection."

"I do not blame you, of course," he said quietly, and with a touch of scorn in his voice, "for thinking so badly of men——"

"You misunderstand me," she interrupted.

"Of me, then?"

"I do not think badly of you."

"You think I am incapable of telling the truth."

"No, no. Your words are too strong. I think you are mistaken."

"You do not believe that I love you—that I would rather have your love than all the world beside——?"

"You fancy you love me, no doubt. You fancied you loved another girl not very long ago."

He stared at her for a moment or two in dumb silence. He could scarcely have been more astonished if a bomb had exploded at his feet.

"Perhaps we had better not pursue that subject further," he said at length, and they walked in silence toward the house.

Mary did not get up to see him off the next morning. He left by the earliest available train, and insisted that neither Mary nor her mother should be disturbed. Mary was not at all surprised when she got downstairs to discover that he had gone. On the whole, she was very much relieved. She had lain awake nearly all night fighting the hardest battle she had ever known, and she was not desirous that he should see the marks of the conflict.

She was still rocked in the thorny cradle of doubt. She would have given all she possessed to be sure that

Lostun loved her. She told herself again and again that she ought to believe him—that he was not the kind of man to trifle with words—that he was too honest to say what he did not mean.

But in spite of everything doubts would come. His very high-mindedness, instead of making her trustful, made her mistrustful. She knew that he still regarded himself as an intruder, that the thought of supplanting her had always been a pain to him. She knew that his conscience would find rest if he could only persuade her to share Digby's fortune with him, and that it would be a constant grief to him to see her struggling for her daily bread. Hence she could not get away from the fear that it was not a genuine love that prompted him—that pity coupled with a sense of justice were the main factors in the case.

She was angry with herself that she had permitted Lostun to become so much to her. She wondered why it was that the mere sound of his voice set her heart throbbing so wildly, why the house seemed so empty and cheerless just because he had taken his departure.

Her mother took her to task very gravely over the breakfast-table, but Mary would not confess to any ill-treatment of Lostun.

"But you certainly avoided him, Mary."

"Perhaps I did. I am not in the habit of throwing myself in the way of young men."

"But there is reason in everything, and it ought not to be forgotten that he was our guest."

"Your guest, you mean. I was no party to the invitation."

"I certainly had no idea that you objected to his being invited."

“ I didn’t object. You may invite him here again next week if you like.”

“ That is not to be thought of now. I saw he was hurt on Saturday evening. Yesterday he looked almost angry.”

“ He was angry.”

“ Oh ! Did you quarrel ? ”

“ I am not given to quarrelling with people,” and she got up from table and left the room.

During the rest of the day she felt more miserable than she had done for many a long week. The one pleasant drop in her cup was Lostun’s confession of love ; but that yielded her no genuine satisfaction. If she could only dismiss her miserable doubts she might be happy.

By the next day she had recovered her outward serenity, but her heart remained in a curious condition of unrest. Every now and then she felt her nerves thrilling at the memory of Lostun’s words. It was sweet to hear from his lips that he loved her.

Then her face would become clouded, and the light would go out of her eyes. It was not love at all that he felt for her. It was just pity, nothing more. Men did not know what love meant. David Smart had used far more passionate language, but it amounted to nothing. Besides, only a few months ago Lostun had been talking love to some doctor’s daughter. And now that this London girl had jilted him he had come to her. It was all miserable pretence from first to last. If Lostun had really loved her he would not have taken his dismissal so quietly. He had no doubt satisfied his conscience, and having done that he would be off to fresh fields and pastures new. Her business now was to forget him as quickly as possible.

## CHAPTER XL

### LIFE'S LITTLE DAY

**L**OSTUN'S hope of winning Mary Maxwell seemed to grow feebler day by day. He got no further invitation to visit Winterholme, and he felt that after his last interview with Mary he could not go uninvited. He saw, too, that the gulf between them had been considerably widened by Mary's discovery that he had been engaged to Sophy Wilks. She would naturally conclude that love with him was a very superficial affair. A man who could make love to another girl three months after he had been jilted would naturally lay himself open to the taunt that love with him was not a matter of very much consequence.

He thought about the matter a good deal, but he saw no way out of the difficulty. He could not go to Mary Maxwell and explain that he had never really loved Sophy Wilks—that would be a confession that would not raise him in her estimation. Fortunately his work kept him busy from week-end to week-end, so that he was left very little time for brooding. Sunday proved the most trying day of all. Even if he put in three services, a good deal of time was left on his hands. He had made a number of acquaintances, but they were rarely available when he wanted them. Occasionally Tom Verney was at hand, but

the greater number of his Sundays he spent with his own people at Longhampton. So that Lostun was left for long hours on the stretch to the sole companionship of his pipe.

Lostun often dreamed of Mary Maxwell as he sat alone on Sunday evenings. Her face came and went before his vision constantly. He pictured life as it might be if she kept him company and inspired him with word and smile. He wondered, and wondered again, if in the chances of life they might come together and all his hopes be realised.

Occasionally he got a little depressed. What was all his money worth to him? He got no more out of life than he got before. He still lived in lodgings, still pursued the same lonely way through the world. He might, of course, have lived at an expensive hotel, and ate expensive dinners, and drank expensive wines. Or he might have bought a motor-car and sped over country roads in a cloud of dust, and earned the imprecations of the village-folk for his furious driving. He might have attended race meetings and speculated on the turf. He might have frequented theatres and music-halls. He might have aped the gay young man about town.

But none of these things appealed to him. The foolish excitements that men dubbed pleasure seemed to him the essence of folly. The gay young man generally looked the most bored and unhappy creature in existence. The hunt for enjoyment was the most exhausting of all pursuits, and usually ended in the bitterest disappointment.

The people who make pleasure the end of existence are generally the unhappiest people alive. Lostun was quick to discover that a man's life consisted not in the abundance of his possessions. Love, after all, was

the crown of being. Love gave brightness to the sunshine, and beauty to the flowers. Love smoothed every pillow and sweetened every cup it touched. Love cast out bitterness and hushed the voice of strife. Love was life's true elixir, and without it all the rest was only dust and ashes.

Monday morning, however, generally found Lostun as cheerful as the spring-time. He loved his work, and everything in the shape of business was going ahead satisfactorily. In joining Cleveland & Glover he was convinced he had done the right thing. He not only provided scope for the exercise of his own peculiar gifts, but he was doing good to the town in which old Digby had made his money.

So the weeks slipped away rapidly and grew into months. Winter lay all over the land again, and people everywhere were talking of the near approach of Christmas. To Lostun the season meant little or nothing. To the man without friends or kindred Christmas is the most depressing period of the year.

He was looking a little dejectedly in at the shop windows one evening, and thinking what a pleasure it would be if he had only a few friends to whom he could send some Christmas gift, when a voice spoke almost close to his ear, which he recognised, and turning his head quickly he found himself face to face with Frank Harley.

Instantly they shook hands and entered into conversation. Lostun had liked Harley from their first meeting, while the tragedy of Harley's life had deepened his regard.

"And have you heard anything of Sophy lately?" Lostun asked, after they had talked for some time on general topics.

"Have you not heard?" Harley questioned in a startled voice.

"I've not heard a syllable since our last meeting," Lostun replied. "I hope——"

"I am surprised you have heard nothing," Harley interrupted. "It has been in all the papers."

"In all the papers?"

"Oh yes. There was a great deal made of it, and no wonder. You see the poor girl was very unhappy. It was an awful mistake she made. Old Marks was a perfect brute."

"Did he ill-treat her?"

"As far as I can make out he did nothing else. But I never liked to inquire too closely. It made me so unhappy."

"Well?" They had turned into a quiet street, where they could talk with less interruption.

"It is possible she tried the old scoundrel's temper sometimes, for she had a sharp tongue when she was angry, but her heart was good, Mr. Lostun."

"I am glad to hear you say so."

"Well, you see, I had known her from being a child, and God knows I was fond of her. But, as I was saying, she was very miserable after she married old Marks. He had promised her a motor-car and a house in the West End, and all that; and after their marriage he laughed at her."

"The rascal."

"She kept her misery mostly to herself. She was ashamed to let people see how terribly she had been duped. But one night she came to our house quite late. She seemed unable to bear it any longer."

"Yes?"

"Mother was on the point of going to bed, and I had gone into the kitchen to see that the doors had been



properly fastened. I heard her voice in the hall, and my heart almost stopped. I knew she was crying ; and though I ached to see her, I had scarcely the courage to go in. So I loitered in the kitchen for several minutes. She told mother that the day before old Marks had locked her in a dark closet, and kept her without food or drink for twenty-four hours."

"The old brute."

"Oh, he had no heart, no respect for womanhood. He looked upon Sophy as his property to do as he liked with. Sophy was sobbing on mother's shoulder when I came into the room, but when she heard my step she looked up and dashed away her tears, but I shall never forget the look on her face, Mr. Lostun——"

"Yes ! go on."

" ' Oh, Frank, Frank, ' " she cried out, " ' can nothing be done to save me ? ' "

"And what did you say ? "

"What could I say ? I felt utterly helpless. She was another man's wife. God only knows how I longed to take her in my arms and comfort her, and promise to protect her. Oh, it seemed to me a cruel, wicked thing just then that a few words uttered before a priest or a rabbi should tie that poor girl to her tormentor until death should release the one or the other."

"You see, she chose her own lot."

"But does God Almighty leave no place for repentance ? Is it in the interests of justice or morality that from such a bond there is no escape ? But I am running away from my story. Poor Sophy understood from my silence that I could do nothing for her, and she sank down into an easy-chair and hid her face in her hands."

"But what did your mother advise ? "

"Well, you know, mother has very strict notions."

I don't say she is wrong. Sophy wanted to stay the night, but mother could not consent to that, though I knew her heart was breaking for the poor girl. You see, people would talk, and she dreaded anything in the nature of a scandal. Besides, she believed that the place of a married woman is with her husband."

"Even when he is a brute?"

"All laws are of the same value in mother's eyes, whether made by the Almighty or by the House of Commons."

"So you persuaded her to go back?"

"There was nothing else to be done. Sophy writhed at first when mother mentioned it, and bit her fingers till they bled. Oh, I shall never forget the despairing look in her eyes to my dying day. 'Is this what marriage means?' she cried, with the hot tears streaming down her face. 'Oh, it is wicked! wicked! wicked!' But she grew a little calmer after awhile, and by the time mother had got on her bonnet and cloak she seemed fairly resigned."

"Your mother went home with her?"

"We both went. Poor girl, she walked between us, leaning heavily on our arms. She might have been going to her execution, she trembled so. Neither of us talked very much. I dared not trust myself to speak. I felt ready to break all the commandments at a single blow. At the door she threw her arms suddenly round my neck and kissed me. 'Oh, Frank, I have always loved you,' she whispered in my ear, then she ran lightly up the steps and rang the bell. A hideous old servant, who had been with Marks thirty years, opened the door. Sophy turned for a moment on the threshold and looked back, and I saw her eyes glistening with tears—that was the last we ever saw of her."

"The last you ever saw of her?"

"Yes. The next morning she was found dead in bed."

"Found dead?"

"She had taken poison on getting into bed. She had evidently planned everything beforehand. When her last hope failed, and mother and I took her back to her husband—why, there was nothing left. She could not endure living with old Marks any longer. So she died."

For a long time the two young men walked on in silence. They scarcely heeded the direction they were taking. Lostun—perhaps from force of habit—bent his steps towards his home.

Lostun was the first to break the silence.

"Won't you come into my rooms and rest a bit?" he said. "It's early yet."

"Thanks, I don't mind if I do."

Lostun got out his cigars and ordered some coffee.

"And how long ago was all this?" he questioned, cutting off the end of a cigar."

"Less than a month."

"And her father? What of him?"

"I don't know. After urging Sophy to give you up, he went off all in a hurry to America, and now he can't be found. It is believed Sophy wrote to him under another name. The postman says he delivered foreign letters to her, but old Marks will say nothing. Some people say he is conscience-smitten, but that I do not believe."

"But Sophy had property in her own right."

"That she has left to me."

"To you?"

"She made a will less than six weeks after she was married, providing that in case she died leaving no descendants, her property was to go to me."

"She made sad havoc of her life."

"And of mine. I think how happy we might have been together. Sophy and I were meant for each other, I'm sure we were. And but for the foolish notion she got into her head that money was everything, we might have been living by this time in a little paradise of our own. But women are inscrutable creatures, Mr. Lostun."

"You think so?"

"It is impossible to think anything else."

Lostun smiled a little sadly, and went on smoking in silence.

Long after Harley had taken his departure he sat staring into the fire. That his thoughts should take on a sombre hue was only natural. Though he had never loved Sophy, and had grown to have no respect for her character, he could not help feeling saddened at her untimely death. Under other conditions she might have lived a happy and even a useful life. She had vivacity and brightness, and a great capacity for enjoyment, but she let the passion for money eat like a canker into her heart, and this was the tragic end.

"Poor Sophy," he said to himself, "and poor Harley." Then he began to reflect on his own fate. It seemed to him as if in another way money was spoiling his own life also. The more he reflected, the more he was convinced that it was old Digby's money that lay between him and Mary Maxwell. He had seen her point of view from the first—had tried to overcome it, but after six months' waiting the barrier seemed greater than ever.

As Christmas drew near, a great longing welled up in his heart to visit Winterholme again. And partly to pave the way, and partly because he was by nature

generous, he sent Mrs. Maxwell a pretty rosewood writing-table for her drawing-room. "With best wishes for a happy Christmas from your affectionate cousin Jack."

In a few days came an answer which quite warmed his heart, but there was no invitation to Winterholme—everything but that in set and definite terms—and yet had he read between the lines he would have seen that he would have been a thousand times welcome. But he was slow to take hints in some things, though quick enough in others.

Having taken one step, he thought he might take a second. So he set off into Regent Street and bought a gold bracelet which had caught his fancy a few days previously. This he despatched to Mary with the same form of Christmas greeting as that which he sent to her mother. During the whole of the next day he felt very nervous and ill at ease. If Mary accepted his gift in the spirit of her mother, he felt that there would be hope for him, but he was by no means sure she would do so. Sweet and generous as she was, she was also proud, and she would rather suffer anything than compromise herself in the smallest degree.

He knew enough of women's fondness for pretty things to be quite sure that Mary would be strongly tempted to keep the bracelet. It was a fine example of the goldsmith's art, and if she sent it back he would have to take it for granted that her mind was fully made up. He pictured her looking at it with admiring and longing eyes—fastening it on her wrist, and moving her hand about to see the diamonds flash. "Oh, I hope she will keep it," he kept saying to himself. "If she does, I'll make an excuse for going to see her before the year is out."

Next morning he looked eagerly through his letters,

but there was no reply from her, and he hurried away to his office feeling more hopeful than he had done for a long time past. All the day he kept saying to himself : " I hope she will keep it. Oh, I hope she'll keep it."

It was later than usual when he got home that evening, and the first thing he saw when he entered his room was a small square packet, with Mary's handwriting on the label.

He knew in a moment what it meant, and for a while did not open it. When he had sufficiently recovered himself, he took out his penknife and cut the string. Inside was the square morocco case which he remembered so well, and on the top was a note neatly folded. He lifted the note at once and opened it.

" DEAR MR. LOSTUN DIGBY," it read,— " Thank you so much for sending me such a beautiful present. I wish I could keep it. But under the circumstances I am sure you will agree with me that it would not be quite seemly to do so. I wish I could explain more fully, but you will understand I know. Please accept my sincerest wishes for your happiness during this Christmastide, and believe me, yours sincerely,

" MARY MAXWELL."

Lostun read the letter twice, then slowly crushed it in his hand and threw it in the grate. For a few moments he stood with set face watching it as it first turned to flame, then to ashes, and when the last of it had disappeared, he turned away with a bitter smile, and walked slowly upstairs and began to dress for dinner.

## CHAPTER XLI

### A VISITOR

LOSTUN found entertainment during the Christmas week by entertaining others.

"My next gifts," he said to himself, "shall be to people who will appreciate them."

On this point he encountered no difficulty. A crowd of hungry and ragged children followed him into a cheap restaurant with the light of a big expectation in their eyes, and when he told the waiters to give them as much as they could eat, and of the best, he had no need to ask if the youngsters were grateful. Thankfulness beamed on their faces and glistened in their eyes.

He told the cashier when he paid the bill that it was the cheapest evening's entertainment he had ever had.

On the following evening he entertained an even larger crowd, and was surprised to find how many people could be made happy by the expenditure of a single sovereign. So day after day the circle of his ministrations widened, till an enterprising reporter put a sudden stop to his benevolent activities by publishing an article describing him and his work. Lostun hated publicity. Moreover, it gathered round him such a rabble of mendicants and idlers that he was compelled to leave his lodgings for a week and take refuge in an hotel a mile away.

That Mary Maxwell should read the newspaper article was inevitable. The *Longhampton Post* had a keen eye for copy, and Lostun just then was one of the most talked of as well as one of the most popular men in the town. Hence the article was not only reprinted, but lavishly embroidered. A contrast was drawn between old Digby and his heir, and Lostun came in for an amount of fulsome praise that made him very angry when he read it.

Mary's eyes grew soft and luminous when she read the article. She did not believe that the praise was in the least excessive. Lostun was the finest character she had ever met—the most unselfish and the most upright.

Time, instead of dimming her eyes, had cleared them. Her doubts faded with the passing of the days. Lostun's sincerity appeared in a hundred little ways. She was as certain now as she was of her own existence that she had been wrong in her judgment.

But there was no recalling the past. She had let him go away with a bitter feeling rankling in his heart. She had as good as told him to his face that she did not believe in his sincerity, and that his offer of marriage was just the outcome of a generous desire to do the right thing.

Of course he would never come back. She judged him by herself. She knew her own pride would not allow her to humble herself to such an extent, and it was not likely, therefore, that he would bend the knee again to her.

She did her best to forget him. But it is not easy for a woman to put absolutely out of her life a man who has made love to her, especially a man whose daily life awakes unconsciously her admiration. Besides, she loved him when she rejected him, and



had loved him for months previously without being aware of it.

She often recalled the early days of their acquaintance. She remembered with strange vividness his first visit to Winterholme, and how he appealed to her with an unwonted sense of affinity. It was pleasant to think of the walks and talks they had, and to turn over in her mind some of the words that fell from his lips.

How strangely blind she had been. Were women always blind, she wondered? Was it their nature to snap at shadows and lose the substance?

Lostun's Christmas gift staggered her for a moment, and if she had looked at it a second time, she would have pocketed her pride and kept it. "She was never quite sure what impulse seized her, whether it was wholly pride, or whether it was a mixture of pride and stupidity, or whether it was a woman's craving for the luxury of being miserable—she did not know. She scarcely thought about the matter until the packet had been sent away; then she sat down and cried.

"I'm like all women," she thought almost angrily. "I make a martyr of myself just for the pleasure of commiserating with my own lacerated feelings. It was a peace-offering, and he meant it as such, and I have flung it back into his teeth."

She kept up a pretence of cheerfulness during the Christmas. Some of the girls whose parents were abroad remained at school, and these had to be entertained. Discipline, of course, was relaxed during the holidays. Young people of both sexes came trooping up to Winterholme, and there were charades, and whist drives, and dances.

But Mary's eyes grew larger and her face more pale as the winter wore away. Lostun's name was rarely

mentioned, but Mrs. Maxwell had a pretty shrewd idea how matters stood, but wisely forebore asking any questions.

Meanwhile Lostun was throwing himself into his business with increasing earnestness and enthusiasm. Work seemed about the only thing he had to live for. He was not in the least keen about making money, and yet orders came crowding in faster than the firm could execute them, and the profits steadily grew.

He often turned longing eyes in the direction of Winterholme when he was at Longhampton, but he made no further attempt to break down the barrier of silence that had grown up between him and Mary Maxwell. To say that he had relinquished all hope would not be quite correct. Youth is never hopeless. What the future had in store for him he did not know. His business was to do the work that lay close at hand, and leave the rest.

He did not know that he was overtaxing his strength. Few men do when in the thick of the fight. Hence, when he went down before an epidemic of influenza that was sweeping the country he was not a little surprised. He fancied he was strong enough to resist the attentions of any microbe, however persevering it might be, and with the unthinking doggedness of youth refused to go to bed, even when in a high state of fever.

There came a morning, however, when, in trying to get out of bed, he fell full length on the floor, and in trying to get in again stumbled across the bed in a dead faint.

Tom Verney, who came in to see him at his request, went off at once and fetched a doctor.

"But you can make me up a prescription that will pull me round again?" Lostun pleaded.

"No, I can't. I'm not qualified yet," was the reply, "and your case is too serious to be bungled."

"It's only a bit of a cold," Lostun protested.

"Colds are at the beginning of a good many things," Verney answered, with a laugh. "Anyhow, I'm going to fetch a doctor," and he went.

Lostun remained in bed a fortnight, and the *Longhampton Post* issued a bulletin every day.

He was nearly at the worst when he received a visit that surprised him. The nurse came into the room with a perplexed—not to say mysterious—look in her eyes.

"A lady wants to see you," she said in an aggrieved tone. "What am I to say?"

"That I am not receiving visitors," he answered indifferently.

"Exactly. But, as it happens, it doesn't answer. The lady knows you are ill, that's why she came. She says she's related to you."

"Related to me?" he questioned, half closing his eyes. "What is she like?"

"Tall, well-dressed, and I should say rather handsome."

"Young?"

"Oh no, a middle-aged lady. She gave me her card, but what I have done with it I cannot imagine;" and she began straightening out the tucks in her dress.

"Don't you remember her name?"

"I really did not take much notice. I was thinking of something else at the time."

"Was it Maxwell?"

"Yes, that's the name. Shall I go down and say you cannot possibly see her?"

"No; show her up."

The nurse went away, not looking very well pleased, and a minute or two later there was the rustle of silk outside the door, and then Mrs. Maxwell came hurriedly into the room.

"I could not help coming to see you," she began. "We saw in the papers that you were ill."

"It is awfully kind of you to come," he said, with a smile.

"Mary and I could not help wondering how you were being looked after. Living in rooms may be all right when one is well——"

"Is she in good health?" he interrupted, without looking at her.

"Who, Mary? I don't think she is really first-rate, but she doesn't complain."

"And the school?"

"Oh, that's all right," was the laughing answer. "We've been really very fortunate that none of our girls have caught the influenza."

"And you are as crowded as usual?"

"We have more names on our waiting-list than ever before. But it's you I'm concerned about, not the school. You have been working too hard."

"Why do you think so?"

"Dr. Verney told me. He said he was not at all surprised to hear that you had been bowled over, and that you will have to take great care when you get better."

"Oh, I always take care," he laughed.

"That's just what you don't do. It's a pity you have not a mother to look after you. I really think I shall have to lay down the law myself."

"I wish you would," he answered, laughing feebly.

"Then I stipulate that, as soon as you are able to travel, you come to Winterholme for a week."

The colour came into his face in a moment.

"That would scarcely be advisable on many grounds," he said hesitatingly. "I might carry infection."

"You would not come till you are quite free of that; and, besides, you would not go near the school."

"But I should be terribly in the way," he answered.

"You would not be in the way at all, and the clear, bracing air of Winterholme would set you on your feet again."

"I expect I shall need a change when I get up," he said musingly.

"Of course you will need a change. And I insist that you come to Winterholme."

He smiled feebly, but did not reply.

"I know that you and Mary have had a little tiff," she went on, "and that you are both as proud as you can be. But it's really silly that relatives should freeze each other. Don't you think so?"

"Did—did—Mary tell you we had quarrelled?"

"Not she. Nobody told me. It was not necessary that anybody should say anything about it. Actions speak louder than words."

"You see she—she doesn't like me very much."

"Stuff and nonsense! She likes you better than anyone else of her acquaintance."

"I'm sure you are mistaken."

Mrs. Maxwell laughed pleasantly and knowingly.

"So it is settled?" she questioned at length.

"N-no, I don't think so."

Mrs. Maxwell dropped into a chair, with a good-natured smile lighting up her face.

"It looks as if I'm in for a long visit," she said.

"Ye-es?"

"I'm going to stay until you get into a reasonable frame of mind."

"Then I would like to remain unreasonable for a week."

They both laughed at that, and then the nurse came back into the room. Mrs. Maxwell, however, carried her point before she left.

It was quite late when she got back to Winterholme, and Mary had begun to wonder what had kept her so long at Longhampton.

"I've been to London," was the abrupt reply to the inquiring light in Mary's eyes.

"To London, mother?"

Mrs. Maxwell nodded.

Mary waited until her mother should choose to enlighten her further.

"Jack is very ill," she said at length. "He makes light of it, of course, but anyone can see he's frightfully weak."

"Then you've seen him?"

"Of course I've seen him. What did I go to town for?"

"You did not say when you went out this morning——"

"But I meant it all the same," she interrupted. "We are the only relatives he has, and I was very much afraid he wasn't being well looked after, so I went to see for myself."

"And he is quite comfortable?"

"Ye-es. He seems to have a capable nurse. But it must be frightfully lonely for him. I wonder with all his money he does not set up a house of his own."

"Would he be less lonely, do you think?"

"Perhaps not. It all depends. Anyhow, I have got him to promise to come here for a week when he gets better."

"You say he has promised?"

"He has. Why not?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I thought he had cut us completely."

Mrs. Maxwell looked at her for a moment and smiled, but she did not make any reply.

For the next ten days Mary felt in a peculiarly "nervy" condition. Her whole future seemed to be trembling in the balance. What would happen? Would Lostun treat her as he might any other distant relative, or——?

Why would the blushes come to her cheeks at the most inconvenient times? Why was it that the coming of Lostun filled her thoughts to the exclusion of everything else?

On the day Lostun arrived she found herself unable to settle to anything. Her mother had arranged to meet him at the station with a closed carriage. The weather was wonderfully mild for February, with a perfectly clear sky and brilliant sunshine.

A big fire of logs was burning in the drawing-room, and she went in every now and then to look at the thermometer, and to see that the daffodils were not drooping. Big bowls of primroses stood on the tables and piano, and filled the room with a delightful fragrance. The softest cushions lay on the Chesterfield couch. A big easy-chair was wheeled up near the fire. The choicest books were scattered about the room.

She wished she felt a little less excited. It was so stupid not to be able to sit still for three minutes on the stretch. Would he treat her like any ordinary stranger, or——?

She ran to the window. She thought she heard the sound of carriage wheels. Then she looked at the clock. They could not possibly be here for several minutes

yet, even if the train were in time—a most unlikely occurrence.

She had dressed herself with more than usual care. She tried to persuade herself that she had done nothing of the sort, and that if anyone else had been calling she would have taken just as much care with her toilette—it was a weakness of hers to dress well—it was her only extravagance.

She was conscious when she glanced at a mirror that her eyes were wonderfully bright, and that her cheeks glowed with unusual colour.

She went to the window half a dozen times in as many minutes. Should she receive him very stiffly and formally, or should she tell him quite candidly that she was glad to see him?

A girl, of course, could not be too careful. She was so liable to be misunderstood. And then——

There was a faint sound of wheels in the distance. She ran to the window again.

“Here they are at last,” she said, clasping her hands and breathing quickly.

When the carriage drew up she stood at the open door.



## CHAPTER XLII

### THE VICTORY

SIX weeks later Lostun might have been seen sitting in the sunshine in a sheltered corner of the lawn with an open book on his knee, but with his eyes fixed dreamily on the distant landscape.

He had been a week at Winterholme, and was gaining strength rapidly, when he caught a chill, and for a good many days the doctor held out very little hope of his recovery. Two trained nurses, assisted by Mrs. Maxwell and Mary, watched over him night and day, and in the end good nursing triumphed.

"You owe your life to the women-folk," the doctor said to him jocularly one day, when his strength was beginning to come back to him again.

"I have been well looked after," he answered, with a wan smile.

"Well looked after? I should think you have. You are just an example of what good nursing can do. It's not medicine that has pulled you through. It's the women who have done it."

"Hurrah for the women," Lostun answered feebly, a wan smile lighting up his pale face.

"You may well say that ;" and the doctor went out of the room to talk with the nurse.

As soon as Lostun was able to be dressed, Mary

was in constant attendance on him. All the past was sunk out of sight, and if it was not entirely forgotten, neither of them alluded to it.

Apparently by silent and mutual consent they had entered upon a new stage of their life. They were neither strangers nor lovers, but just friends and comrades. He sometimes wondered how he held himself so well in hand, for she seemed to grow more winsome and more beautiful every day. She was never obtrusive, and yet she anticipated his every want, and was quick to answer the look in his eyes.

She seemed to take it for granted that he had got over his love for her. They were just cousins—or something closer still—brother and sister. All her diffidence seemed to vanish. She could be as affectionate as a sister, and he would understand.

He did understand. At least he thought he did. It was something to be grateful for that Mary loved him as a brother.

He leaned upon her shoulder when he came downstairs, and praised her for her strength and gentleness. He little guessed how deeply his words stirred her heart, or how great a joy it was to be of service to him.

Winter had merged into spring, and April's green and sunshine swept the land. It was a delight to creep out of doors again, and feel the soft south wind upon his cheeks. Mary was his crutch. How good she was. How sweet and patient. How ready to sacrifice herself that she might minister to his comfort.

If he loved her in the old days, he loved her a hundredfold more now. It was well, he thought, she did not know, for if she guessed she would rush away like a frightened bird.

Mary used to look at him a little wistfully now and

then when his eyes were away on the distant hills. She had been right, after all. He had never really loved her. He had wanted to be generous, that was all; and yet if he only could have loved her she would have been the happiest woman on earth.

He had not been sitting long in the sunshine when Mary came and sat down on a cushion at his feet. She looked a little worn with so much nursing and anxiety, but in her eyes there was a look of sweet content that was near akin to happiness. She had done her duty, and she had her reward in seeing this brave, strong man winning his way back to health and strength every day.

"The colour is beginning to come back into your cheeks already," she said, smiling up into his face.

"Is that so? Oh, I shall be all right again soon, thanks to you and your mother."

"Oh, but the nurses did splendidly. No one could have been better served."

"I'm a lucky dog, I expect," he said, with a laugh. "I always seem to fall on my feet."

"But you have had a very narrow escape this time. None of us knew how narrow until the worst was over."

"I sometimes wonder if I'm as thankful as I ought to be," he said dreamily, after a long pause.

"Thankful?"

"I suppose existence itself is something to be grateful for. And yet I don't know. Merely to live is not very much, after all."

"But your life is so full," she said, looking shyly up into his face.

"And so empty. I'm but a lonely creature in the main."

"But you have a great many friends in London."

"Not a great many. No, no. Real friends are few and far between. And a man coming from another country to settle in a big city has to be constantly on his guard."

"Do you ever pine for America?"

"Not now. Oh no; my heart is in England. I suffered a little from home-sickness during the first few months I was here, but last summer when I was in the States I discovered that this was my true home."

"And that feeling will grow, I expect."

"Do you think so? I don't know. A fellow in diggings is always more or less homeless. To be orphaned so early in life is a serious handicap."

"But you will not always remain in diggings?"

The words were out before she was aware, and regretted directly they were spoken.

He looked at her for a moment with a pathetic light in his eyes.

"I expect I shall," he said, smiling. "You see, I don't like hotel life."

"It must be very unrestful and dissipating," she said reflectively, looking away towards the distant hills which were growing purple in the light of the westering sun.

"I think I am naturally a home bird," he said, without looking at her. "That is the reason, I expect, why this place appeals so strongly to me, and why I almost dread going back to town."

"We shall be very sorry when you have to go."

"Sorry?"

"Why not?"

"And after all the trouble I have given you?"

"We have never looked upon it as trouble. We have been very glad to serve you."

"You and your mother are two of the best women on earth. To have such friends atones for a great deal."

"You will make crowds of friends as time goes by," she said hastily.

"I don't think I want to make crowds of friends," he answered, with a far-away look in his eyes, and then silence fell for several moments.

The western hills grew more indistinct. There was not breeze enough to stir the brooding haze.

"Did you ever think it strange," he went on at length, "that the things we do not want come to us without trouble and without effort, while the things we pine for remain persistently out of reach?"

"Perhaps if they were within our reach we should not pine for them," she answered, with a smile.

"Well, yes, of course," and he broke into a hearty laugh. "Naturally we don't pine for the things we have, do we? But, on the other hand, don't we always pine for things that are out of reach?"

"We frequently do."

"And is that the only reason I pine for you?"

She darted at him a startled glance, and the hot blood rushed in a torrent to her neck and face.

"Please pardon me," he said hurriedly and penitently. "I did not intend to vex you again. But it is hard to love you so much and remain for ever silent."

"Do you really mean that?" she asked, almost in a whisper, with her eyes bent on the ground.

"You still doubt my sincerity?" he questioned slowly and regretfully. "Then let me explain once more. May I?"

"If you wish." She did not look at him, and her voice was scarcely above a whisper.

"I think I owe it to myself," he went on. "It

hurts me to think that the one whose good opinion I prize above all other things regards me as a hypocrite."

"No, no," she cried, raising her burning face to his. "I never said that. I never meant it. I did think you were mistaken—that you gave too large a place to your sense of justice. But—but——"

"You do not think I wilfully deceived myself or you?" he interrupted.

"I cannot think that now," she answered, her eyes swimming with tears, "though at the time my faith in human nature had been rudely shaken."

"That is enough," he replied. "To know that you believe in me will be a comfort in the coming days. I have tried to be honest with myself and you. That I love you is the outstanding fact of my life. I cannot help it. I am not to blame for it. I have tried hard to conquer it, God knows. I know now that it is not to be conquered—that it must abide to the end. That you cannot love me in return is my misfortune——"

"But I do love you," she cried out suddenly, then hid her face in her hands.

"Did I hear aright, Mary?" he questioned, and he reached out his thin hand and touched her hair.

She raised her swimming eyes to his without faltering.

"Oh, Jack," she said, "don't you see? Don't you understand that I have loved you all the time?"

"Loved me all the time, darling?" then, somehow, she climbed into his arms and nestled her face close to his. No one was about, and no one could see them. It was like a dream to both, a dream so wonderful that no human lips could shape it into speech. The very heavens above them became suffused with a new light. The earth glowed with lovelier tints, the flowers exhaled a more delicious perfume. They had

found the paradise of which prophets dreamed, and poets sang, and in their ecstasy were lost to time and sense and place.

The song of a throstle perched high above their heads brought them suddenly back to earth, and Mary drew with many blushes from his embrace.

"Stand there, sweetheart, and let me look at you," he said, with the light of a great joy shining in his eyes. "It is so wonderful that I cannot realise it yet. How beautiful you are."

"Only in your eyes, you foolish boy."

"Ah, then I shall teach you to look at yourself through my eyes."

"Do you want to make me vain and foolish?"

"You will never be that, darling."

"Then it isn't foolish to love you?" she questioned, running her fingers through his hair.

"It is wonderful, sweetheart, but I hope not foolish. God meant us to love each other."

"Do you know, Jack," she said, her eyes running over with gladness, "I don't feel quite sure even yet that I'm wide awake."

"Would you be so very much disappointed if you awoke to the discovery that it was all a dream?"

"I should break my heart; wouldn't you?"

For answer he kissed her, and then he got up from his chair and made his way into the house leaning on her shoulder.

The drawing-room was empty, and the Chesterfield couch seemed made for two.

"Darling," he said, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "I'm quite sure I shall be a long time getting better."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to go back to town."

"Well, you are not going back for a long time yet."

"And some day you will go back with me?"

"If you are good. But have you considered what mother may say?"

"I have considered nothing save that the dearest girl on earth loves me."

For the next week their conversation, however delightful to themselves, was such as would be scarcely edifying to strangers. Mrs. Maxwell let them be together as much as they liked. In her heart she rejoiced very much at the turn of events. Mary and Lostun saw only the romantic side. She saw the practical side, and it harmonised with her notion of the fitness of things that the fortune that was once her daughter's should in a better sense be hers again.

Lostun recovered his strength almost more rapidly than he desired. Love acted like a tonic. The new hope that possessed him ran like life through all his veins. He became conscious of a buoyancy he had never known before.

Every day he and Mary took a ramble somewhere through quiet lanes and fields. A stranger might wonder what they could possibly have to talk about, for conversation never lagged for a single moment. They were in the humour for confidences, and he kept from her no part of his life. The story of his engagement to Sophy Wilks was the most painful part, but he told it bravely, screening Sophy as much as he possibly could.

But Mary, being a woman, could read easily between the lines, and had no difficulty in laying the blame in the right quarter. It was a fresh revelation to her of the curse of greed. She saw more vividly than she had seen before how the passion for gold saps the



foundations of character, dries up the springs of human affection, and destroys the beauty of life.

She shed tears over the untimely fate of Sophy Wilks, over the tragedy of Frank Harley's life, and wondered what had become of the man who tried to poison her lover, and the even greater sinner, David Smart.

"We must guard, dear, against the danger of riches," she said to Lostun one day, "lest the old man's prophecy come true."

"I believed it had come true until recently," he answered.

"Yes?"

"When it was keeping you and me apart, when it made you doubtful of my sincerity, when it stood up a seemingly unsurpassable barrier, I could have cursed old Digby and his gold."

"But we have got beyond all that now, dearest."

"Yes, sweetheart, and by God's help the money shall not be a curse but a blessing."

Spring merged into summer, and summer sped away like a dream. Lostun had a fancy that he would like to see Poppleham again, and as the Maxwells had never been in Norfolk, they took rooms at the Grand and enjoyed themselves hugely.

Lostun took Mary to all the places he had visited with Sophy. And yet it seemed like a new world to him. His present happiness was like sunshine to starlight.

"Oh, darling," he said, as they sat among the heather on the heights of Nebo, and looked down on the jumble of purple hills, with the little village at the foot, and beyond the wide, shining sea, "I never knew what it was to live, till I had won your love."

Life is greatedened, glorified, made infinitely more beautiful than ever I could have conceived it to be." And for answer she placed her hand in his and smiled.

"I do think I am the happiest fellow alive," he said devoutly.

"And I am the happiest girl."

So the golden days passed away, passed all too swiftly. Lostun was so happy that he wanted time to stop. The sky was so cloudless that he was half afraid clouds might gather. His bliss seemed too perfect for earth.

He spent all his week-ends at Winterholme, and often snatched an evening beside when business called him to Longhampton.

As the autumn crept on and the leaves began to brown, he lost some of the strength and vitality that he had gathered during the summer.

His doctor dropped in to see him one day unexpectedly—not professionally, but as a friend. When leaving, he paused at the door and turned round.

"If you will take my advice," he said, "you will not spend the winter in London."

"No?" Lostun said interrogatively.

"You are all right," the doctor went on, "though it is evident you are overworking yourself again."

"I have been a bit overdoing it lately."

"Take my advice and get away for a change; after such an illness as you had in the spring your lungs will be a little sensitive, and November fogs are bad. Why not take a trip round the world?"

"I never thought of it."

"What's the use of killing yourself to make more money, when you have plenty already?"

"I don't want to kill myself."

"Then pull up. Go South after the sunshine, spend Christmas in Australia."

"That's a long way off—and really——"

"I think I understand," and the doctor laughed. "You don't like the thought of leaving somebody for so long a time."

"That is true. I don't," Lostun replied, with heightened colour.

"Of course you don't," and the doctor laughed again. "Why not take her with you."

"Take her with me——?"

"Nothing impossible in that, is there? Might enjoy the scenery all the more, eh? and not be in such a hurry to get back."

"But really——"

"I want to see the cure made perfect. Change of air, change of scene, absence from an English winter, eight or nine months' complete rest, and—and good company, would just set you up for the rest of your life. Now, you take my advice;" and the doctor passed out into the hall and pulled the door to behind him.

On the following evening Lostun found himself at Winterholme. Mary espied him from an upstairs window and ran down the drive to meet him. It did his heart good to see the lovelight in her eyes, and her smile was like a glimpse of paradise. He wondered if ever a man before loved a woman as he loved Mary, wondered if any other man was so perfectly satisfied in his love.

She leaned on his arm as they came up to the house, and her touch thrilled him to the depths of his being.

"You look tired, Jack," she said to him, when

at length they got into the house and he had dropped into an easy-chair.

"I am a little," he said, with a smile. "The weather is enervating; don't you think so?"

She came and sat on the arm of his chair, and put an arm about his neck.

"You must not work so hard, dearest," she whispered; "why should you?"

"The doctor wants me to take a voyage round the world," he answered.

"Does he think you are ill, dear?" and her voice became suddenly anxious.

"Oh no. But he says change of air, absence from an English winter, and eight or nine months' complete rest would set me up for life."

"Eight or nine months, Jack—oh, I couldn't endure it, dear," and she laid her face close against his.

"He wants me to take you with me, darling."

She sprang to her feet in a moment, and her eyes grew round and big.

"Don't you think it would be lovely, sweetheart?"

"Oh, Jack, but that would mean——"

"Of course it would," and he laughed outright.

"But—but——"

"Is the prospect too terrible, little girl? To go to the Riviera, to Italy, to Egypt, to Japan, to Australia, to San Francisco, and have to take charge of me all the time. Is it too awful to be contemplated?"

"Oh, you silly boy, you know it would be too lovely for words, but—but—— Oh, I don't know. What would mother think?"

"We might ask her."

"Oh, you old darling," and the next moment her arms were about his neck again.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### TILL THE END

A MONTH later Lostun and his young wife were on the wing. Such a blissfully crowded month Mary had never known before, and could scarcely hope ever to know again ; and yet when it was all over, and she and Jack got away together,\* she heaved a big sigh of relief.

There had been pain as well as pleasure, work as well as dreams, partings to temper congratulations. Mary never realised how many friends she had till the wedding presents began to pour in, never knew how much she loved Winterholme till the carriage drove away, and she looked back through a mist of tears and waved her hand at the crowd that was gathered about the door.

Lostun had seen very little of her for a month. There was so much to be done, and so few days comparatively to do it in. Mary had snatched an odd minute now and then from dressmakers and milliners and such-like tiresome individuals. Jack had laughingly told her more than once that he was of no account where frocks and frills were concerned, and she had called him a silly boy and kissed him on the lips.

When at length the carriage drove away amid a shower of confetti and old slippers, he stole his arm around her and drew her to his side.

"At last, darling, I have you to myself," he said, with a sigh of relief.

"Just think of it," she whispered, smiling through happy tears. "We are really married."

"Really and truly;" and then silence fell, for the station loomed in sight.

They spent two or three days in London to complete their outfit for so long an absence, and then sped southward to the Riviera. A week in Cannes, a fortnight in Nice, and then southward again to Rome and Naples, and thence to Egypt. It was a new world to both, and they saw everything through rose-tinted spectacles, and half-fearful, sometimes, that such happiness as theirs could not possibly last.

Their enthusiasm knew no bounds, their energy seemed inexhaustible. They went hand in hand like a couple of happy children through an enchanted country, and conveyed something of their own delight to every group of sight-seers they joined.

By the end of February they were resting for a little while in one of the largest cities in Australia, and there a curious thing happened.

They went one Sunday evening to the largest theatre in the city to hear a local evangelist who for two or three months past had been crowding the theatre every Sunday night with an enthusiastic band of men and women, "drawn together," it was said, "by the simple preaching of the word." So great was the preacher's fame, and so widespread his influence for good, that both Lostun and his wife felt curious to hear him.

They found themselves in the second row of the dress circle twenty minutes before the service began. The place filled rapidly. A buzz of conversation

rose on every side. Behind two or three young men were discussing the preacher in audible tones.

"What I like about John Halliburton," said the first speaker, "is his disinterestedness. It is not often you find a man rich, with a young wife, and every opportunity of enjoying himself, giving up so much of his time and strength to the uplifting of his fellows."

"It is very noble of him," said the second speaker. "I'll be bound if the truth were known he's considerably out of pocket by these services."

"But then he's married a huge fortune, you must remember," chimed in a third speaker.

"All the more credit," was the reply, "in not giving himself up to a life of luxury. He never spares himself when he's preaching, and the way he sways this huge crowd is marvellous."

"Likes to hear himself talk, I expect," said the third speaker, who was clearly disposed to be critical. "Some people get pleasure one way, some another. This is evidently his way."

"Pleasure, no doubt," said the first speaker. "But it's a noble way of getting pleasure. If there were only more men like him it would be a better world."

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the choir upon the stage. A few minutes later the preacher appeared. He was a well-built man of medium height, with a full brown beard, and hair beginning to thin above the temples. A large diamond pin flashed in his satin scarf, and on his left-hand little finger he wore a signet-ring.

He walked modestly and with bent head to the table, and then raised his right hand. A hush followed this movement, and then he began to pray. Scarcely had the first syllable escaped his lips when Lostun

felt a sudden clutch at his arm, and turning his head quickly his eyes met those of his wife.

"I understand, dearest," he said in a whisper.

"Then you recognise him?"

He nodded.

For the rest of the service he sat holding her hand and keeping well behind those in front. That the preacher was David Smart he had not the shadow of a doubt. In appearance he had changed considerably. His full beard completely hid the lower part of his face, and altered the expression of his lips. He wore his hair also much longer, and parted it in the centre. Indeed, Lostun felt he would have passed him anywhere without recognising him.

But there could be no doubt about his voice. Every tone, every modulation, every little trick of rhetoric, every quaver that was meant to express emotion was known to Lostun and to Mary. They had considerable difficulty in sitting still. Lostun was strongly tempted to rise to his feet and denounce him before the whole congregation.

Smart appeared to be in his element. The sight of so large an assembly stirred his blood and quickened all his powers of speech. His rounded sentences throbbed with emotion. His voice caught a thrillingly vibrant tone. His eyes flashed like stars. Now he argued, now he declaimed, and anon he sank his voice to a tender appeal. The crowd hung upon his lips in hushed and awed silence. The more emotional wiped the tears furtively from their eyes, the hardened sat in grim silence and marvelled at the man's ability.

Once or twice Lostun forgot for a moment who the man was, and found himself unconsciously swept along as by a tempest.



Mary never once took her eyes off his face. She seemed fascinated by his daring and effrontery. His hypocrisy confounded her. Pharisaism so colossal, so brazen, so impudent, seemed to render her incapable of any true thought or emotion.

Directly the service concluded they hurried out of the theatre and made their way to their hotel in silence. Speech seemed futile under such circumstances. Silence bore the most eloquent testimony to what they felt.

They were sitting quietly in their own room when Mary set the ball rolling.

"Well, Jack," she said, "what are we to do?"

"You mean in relation to David Smart?"

"Yes, dear."

"I don't know. The problem baffles me."

"But he ought to be exposed. Denounced. Silenced."

"He may have repented and turned over a new leaf. He appears to be doing good. I could find no fault with his exhortation, and the people seemed to be uplifted by it."

"But he is a hypocrite, Jack, a thief, a liar. Think of the number of people he has deceived and robbed."

"Granted, my love. But suppose we expose him, bring him to heel, get him sent to prison, who will benefit by it? He has got married, it seems. Doubtless his wife loves him, believing him to be a good man. She is innocent. We cannot punish him without stabbing her, and stabbing her perhaps more deeply than we stab him. Think of the cause of religion, how that will suffer."

"But can religion be advanced by a bad man?"

"I don't know. The problem is beyond me. Paul said he rejoiced when the Gospel was preached,

though it was preached in some cases out of envy and strife. Besides, I should not like to guarantee the sincerity of all who preach to-day."

"But David Smart is a criminal in the eyes of the law."

"That is true, and I am surprised that he exposes himself to recognition. His passion for preaching seems to have been too strong to be resisted."

"And if he is allowed to go on, he may cheat the people here as he did at home."

"Or he may not. Anyhow, I will not act hastily. I am no believer in revenge—and that is what punishment means in most cases. If to make this man suffer will do good to any considerable number, then let him suffer by all means. But punishment for the sake of punishment, punishment to gratify a savage instinct, punishment that means cruelty to the innocent—No, my darling, I will be no party to that."

"Oh, Jack, you are tender-hearted," and she came and laid her head against his shoulder.

"I want to be merciful," he said. "Since I hope for mercy."

During the next few days Lostun instituted inquiries—wherever he could do so with safety—into the life and character and antecedents of John Halliburton. Not a great deal, however, was known of him. It was believed he was American born. He had been in the colony several months, and had recently married a most estimable lady of considerable means. The good he had accomplished in a short space of time was enormous. His influence was growing by leaps and bounds. He intended to settle permanently in the colony, his private life not known.

As was about the sum of what Lostun was able to glean.

"I think I will talk with him face to face, deaf," he said to his wife one afternoon over tea.

"Yes, do, Jack," she replied, with heightened colour.

"Then I will;" and the subject dropped for that day.

On the following morning Lostun presented himself at the house of the so-called John Halliburton.

It was a substantial and rather handsome house on the outskirts of the city. A servant showed him into a spacious and well-furnished room, that might have served either for dining-room or library. He waited for several minutes with considerable anxiety and trepidation. It was not a pleasant task on which he had come, and as yet he saw no clear way out of it.

At length a step sounded outside. The door was pushed quickly open, and David Smart, alias John Halliburton, stood before him. For a moment he started, changed colour, then suddenly seemed to brace himself for the conflict.

When he spoke his voice was steady and clear.

"You wish to see me," he said, with an American accent. "You are a s perhaps. If there is anything I can do, I shall be glad if it comes within my power."

Lostun felt dumbfounded. The man was more than he had calculated on. Before he had time to reply David proceeded quietly—

"It may be spiritual counsel or a word of advice, or a word of religion, or a word of—"

"You do not know me, of course?" "Lostun?" "To say in a mocking tone."

"Well, no, I have not that pleasure. You are an American, most English visitors are strange to me."















